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Three Defining Features of Kawabata’s *Snow Country*: Culture, Religion, and Mythology

Yasunari Kawabata, the first Japanese author to win the Nobel Peace Prize, wrote his novel *Snow Country* sometime during the years 1935-1947. *Snow Country* was one of the three novels cited by the Nobel Committee in awarding Kawabata the Nobel Peace Prize in 1968. It was translated into English in 1957 by Edward G. Seidensticker and gained popularity internationally. *Snow Country* is a novel full of not only Japanese culture, but mythology and religion, which are all fundamental to Japan’s history. Creatively woven throughout the text, Kawabata presents readers with Japanese concepts possibly unfamiliar; nonetheless, it enhances the story’s beauty and excellence.

Right from the start of the novel, readers are presented with many instances of social and cultural aspects of Japan. The plot of the novel is insignificant in respect to the aesthetics, which is Kawabata’s main purpose. In the novel, beauty cannot come without sadness. This idea is found in abundance and it is essential to the novel; without understanding this concept, many important points in the novel would be overlooked. Many of the instances revolve around the character of Yoko
and her voice. In the very first pages, the protagonist, Shimamura is riding the train to the mountains. As he sits, he hears a girl's voice and comments it is “such a beautiful voice that it struck one as sad” (Kawabata 5). The concept of finding beauty and sadness together is one foreign to Western culture, but familiar to Japanese culture. Shimamura comments on her voice again later as Yoko calls out, “Do you mind if I step over this, Komako?” He thinks, “It was that clear voice, so beautiful that it was almost sad” (56). Even further into the novel, Shimamura hears Yoko calling out again with a “voice so beautiful it was almost lonely” (119).

Another Japanese cultural aspect Kawabata includes in his novel is the idea of yugen which is mysterious, dull, transparent tone because brilliant colors are rarely seen in their culture. Many of the references to the landscape in the novel are described with a yugen aesthetic. As Shimamura looks out the window on the train he describes what he sees as:

The figures and the background were unrelated, and yet the figures, transparent and intangible, and the background, dim in the gathering darkness, melted together into a sort of symbolic world not of this world. (9)

A vague suggestion and hazy artistic description depicts this scene and the idea of yugen. Yugen is also represented later when Kawabata describes “the sound of the freezing snow over the land seemed to roar deep within the earth” (44). He goes on
to illustrate the night sky “retreat[ing] deeper and deeper into the night color” (44). These are perfect demonstrations of the cultural aspect yugen.

Shinto, Japan’s oldest religion, and Buddhism, a religion from India, and ideals of both are written into the novel’s pages. They are two major religions in the country and Kawabata presents the idea of cleanliness (Shinto) and impermanence (Buddhism) throughout the entire novel. The idea of cleanliness is valued in the Shinto religion. Hot baths were taken often and this is clear through Shimamura’s habits, constantly he is headed “down to the bath” (45). On page 18 the word “clean” is used three times all describing Komako. Shimamura thinks, “she must be clean to the hollows under her toes” (18). Women who are clean are also attractive. The Milk Way, alluded to quite frequently in the last portion of the novel, was the pathway in which the deities took to Japan. This is a legend found in the Shinto religion. In the novel, the Milky Way is said to “spread its skirts” (168) alluding to the idea that it is female. The deity Amaterasu founded Japan and took this pathway. Its importance is clear in the last pages of the novel as it is the road to heaven.

The idea of impermanence lends itself to the novel and is a Buddhist concept. There is impermanence in the relationship between Shimamura and Komako. They only meet once a year, every year, and their relationship does not last. Both agree, “it is an affair of the moment, no more. Nothing beautiful about it” (22). Komako states, “people are here for a day or two and gone” (22) so she
does not rely on her relationship with Shimamura because it cannot be maintained. Late one night, Komako is in Shimamura’s room drunk, not “making much sense” (37). Before falling asleep she said: “I won’t have any regrets. I’ll never have any regrets. But I’m not that sort of woman. it can’t last. Didn’t you say so yourself?” (37). Although the connection between herself and Shimamura is one that is impermanent, she embraces it. The novel includes an abundance of Buddhist aspects and the idea of impermanence because of both its importance to the history of Japan and its aesthetic appeal to Kawabata’s imagination.

A large portion of the novel is dedicated to ancient Japanese mythology. One of the myths Kawabata chooses to focus on is that of the cow herder and the weaver maiden stars. The two stars are celebrated because they are permitted to meet only once: on the 7th day of the 7th month. Every year this date marks the Tanabata Festival. The myth states the stars must be separated by the Milky Way. The Tanabata Festival and the Milky way are alluded to throughout Snow Country. The two main characters of the novel reunite once a year, exactly like the two star lovers who are united on July 7th. Komako asks Shimamura, “Once a year is enough. You’ll come once a year, won’t you, while I’m here?” (103). In writing these instances, Kawabata alludes to the Tanabata Festival. Komako understands how Shimamura is the “sort that comes only once a year” (96). Kawabata also alludes to the weaver maiden as Komako “work[s] on [her] sewing in a quite place” (115), which is Shimamura’s room. The weaver maiden star is directly
referred to on page 157 as the protagonist is looking at the landscape, looking into the houses and commenting that “weaver maidens, giv[e] themselves up to their work under the snow” (157). Without understanding the importance of the Tanabata Festival and the two star lovers, one would certainly miss all the allusions and the Japanese myths would be lost in the plot, opposite of Kawabata’s purpose.

The last portion of the novel alludes to the Milky Way in such excess, the reader will not miss it, but question its purpose in relation to Japanese aesthetics and mythology. It is linked to the Tanabata Festival because it separates the weaver maiden star from her lover, the cow herder. Readers may miss the first reference to the Milky Way, but if one knows it is important it cannot be missed. Shimamura alludes to the Milky Way the first time, “The stars are different here form the stars in Tokyo. They seem to float up from the sky” (99). The galaxy is referred to over 40 times towards the end of the novel. The constant allusion to the Milky Way begins with Shimamura’s comment:

The Milky Way. Shimamura too looked up, and he felt himself floating into the Milky Way. Its radiance was so near that it seemed to take him up into it. Was this the bright vastness the poet Bashō saw when he wrote of the Milky Way arched over the stormy sea? The Milky Way came down just over there, to wrap the night earth in its naked embrace. (165)
Shimamura is enchanted with the Milky Way; these passages make clear the importance of the galaxy to the Japanese mythology. Several times Kawabata makes note of Shimamura “floating into the Milky Way” (165), or it “pull[ing] his gaze up into it” (165). Not only does the Milky Way consume Shimamura but as he and Komako are running it “seem[s] to bathe [her] head in its light” (167). The last line of the entire novel is devoted to the Milky Way: “As he caught his footing, his head fell back, and the Milky Way flowed down inside him with a roar” (175). This line confirms the significance of the Milky Way to not only the characters within *Snow Country*, but ultimately, the people of Japan.

*Snow Country* includes the aspect of beauty and sadness and yugen to represent Japanese culture, features both Shinto and Buddhism and facets of the religions, and incorporates important ancient mythology such as the two lover stars and the Milky Way. Yasunari Kawabata’s novel *Snow Country* is a beautiful, imaginative novel that weaves Japanese aesthetics creatively throughout the entire text, sending the plot to the side and allowing culture, religion, and mythology to take precedence.
Works Cited