SYMBIOTIC CONFLICT IN *SNOW COUNTRY*

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The plot structure of *Snow Country* [Yukiguni] (1935-1948 [1971]) by Kawabata Yasunari appears irregular because the story reaches its climax just a few pages into the story with the first mirror scene as an aesthetic moment that at once determines the lyrical nature of the entire work and reveals the author's poetics.[1] Another focal point occurs at the very end in the form of a fire in snow, which critics call the story's only dynamic, sensational scene.[2] In spite of its conventionally climactic position, however, the fire scene has caused authorial uneasiness and interpretative debate. This is partly due to the fact that the story reaches its conclusion even more abruptly than generally accepted with an open ending, and partly to the unreal nature of character portrayals and the scene itself. Unless textual negligence and eventual abandonment on the author's part account for such termination, the last scene has to justify itself with a certain basis for the position it assumes. Symbols centering on the two main female characters, which run entwined throughout the story, give coherence not only to the ambiguous ending but also to the apparently random plot structure.

Kawabata's ambivalence toward the ending is well documented in many of his somewhat inconsistent remarks. For instance, when he was writing the story's early version in 1937, he says that "he has had an idea about the last section [yet to be written after the 'The Pillow of Fire' installment] for quite a long time." But he now finds it "hard to write that part" because he feels that would be "more like a superfluous addition."[3] A

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[1] See Masaki Mori, "Kawabata's Mirrored Poetics," *Japan Studies Review* 8 (2004): 51-68.

[2] Hasegawa Izumi, *Kawabata Yasunari: Sono ai to bi to shi*, Tomo Sensho (Tokyo: Shufu no tomo sha, 1978), p. 106; Hasegawa Izumi, *Kawabata Yasunari ronkō*, Hasegawa Izumi chosaku sen, vol. 5 (Tokyo: Meiji shoin, 1991), p. 310; and Hirayama Mitsuo, "*Yukiguni* no kyo to jitsu," *Kawabata Yasunari: Nihon no bigaku*, Nihon bungaku kenkyū shiryō shinshū, vol. 27, ed. Hatori Tetsuya (Tokyo: Yūseidō, 1990), p. 131.

[3] Kawabata Yasunari, "*Hana no waltz* to *Yukiguni*," 1937, in Inoue Yasushi, Nakamura Mitsuo, and Yamamoto Kenkichi, eds., *Kawabata Yasunari*

decade later after World War II, he states that, "while he was writing the early parts, the materials for the later section were just forming." Calling the piece "a kind of work terminable at any moment," he confesses to the uneasiness he nevertheless felt about the incomplete condition of the prewar version, citing its "ill correspondence between beginning and end." Then, asserting that "he had the fire scene in mind since he was writing a part before the middle," he comments on the newly finished version that "many strains and difficulties were inevitable after a blank of ten years." He even wonders if "it might have been better without a new addition."[4] Toward the end of his career about twenty years later, however, he reminisces, saying that "he had the idea of correspondence between beginning and end before he started writing [the story]." He claims to have made all at once the plan to start with "entering the Snow Country" that is white even at night with snow accumulation and to end with "looking up at the Milky Way at the fire scene in snow."[5] Thus, although the author himself is not certain when he conceived the idea of a fire scene, he stresses the importance of that scene for the story's conclusion. He also repeatedly expresses the necessity of the ending to correspond well with the beginning and a less than satisfactory feeling about the extended, final version.

The entire plot also reveals irregularity. Kawabata often started writing a short story, and, realizing still unexhausted lyricism, he added one sequence after another over years in the form of independent short pieces without necessarily having a structurally solid plan in mind. Taking full advantage of the magazine publication that favors short pieces and a long work in monthly installments, he wrote some of his novels in this manner, of which *Snow Country* is a typical example. As a result, the plot of this novel, which is easy to summarize, sounds haphazard and uneventful. A man comes to a hot spring resort in early winter to see a young geisha while remembering their first encounter the previous spring. After a short stay, he departs. He comes back in autumn, only to leave her again at the onset of winter. Another woman is involved, but her presence is not essential to the chain of episodes. Consequently, Kobayashi Hideo argues that Kawabata

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zenshū, vol. 33 (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1982), p. 123. All translations from Kawabata's writings other than *Snow Country* are mine.

[4] Kawabata, "Dokuei jimei," 1949, in *Kawabata Yasunari zenshū* 33: 387-389.

[5] Kawabata, "*Yukiguni* ni tsuite," 1968, in *Kawabata Yasunari zenshū* 33: 195.

"has not written even a single novel" because he is not interested at all in such important, novelistic elements as social reality, its influence on people, and conflict between individuals.[6]

Against this view that deems the opus devoid of a meaningful plot and deficient as a novel, one can attempt to justify Kawabata as not constrained by the Aristotelian plot structure. Conventional reliance on a coherent chain of action has lost its validity in modernism and postmodernism after centuries of experimentation with a novel's story line. Kawabata himself wrote several modernistic pieces, such as *Crystal Fantasy* [Suishō gensō] (1931), that employs a Joycean stream of consciousness. Furthermore, in Kawabata's case, one cannot ignore the influence of the Japanese literary tradition from the Heian period on. In the fundamentally lyric-based literary tradition, a prose piece well structured with a beginning, a middle body, and especially a clear-cut ending appears highly artificial and untrue to life, unlike the drama-oriented Western counterpart. In addition, Kawabata's manner of composition is ascribable to his familiarity with short forms of Japanese poetic tradition, including *tanka*, *haiku*, and *renga*. He wrote a great number of very short stories, which he called palm-of-the-hand stories (*tenohira no shōsetsu*). Because of their extreme brevity, they lack a well-developed plot, often aiming rather at an impressionistic, lyrical effect. In a sense, he made some of his novels by combining palm-of-the-hand-like stories in a *renga* fashion.[7] For these reasons, classical and modern, the lack of a seamlessly developing plot in many of Kawabata's works should be considered not a shortcoming inherent in his writing method but simply an artistic device or a convention tinged with idiosyncrasy.

The view that dwells on the apparently random plot structure of *Snow Country* as defective can also be altered by demonstrating that the story does have coherent inevitability even though it is not based on the action of characters. As Kawabata's remarks cited above indicate, the

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[6] Kobayashi Hideo, *Bungei hyōron*, vol. 2, Chikuma sōsho, vol. 210 (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1974), p. 295. All translations from Japanese secondary sources are mine.

[7] Concerning this point, see, for instance, Anthony V. Liman, "Kawabata's Lyrical Mode in *Snow Country*," *Monumenta Nipponica* 26/3-4 (1971): 271-272; Hasegawa, *Kawabata Yasunari*, p. 107; and Iwata Mitsuko, *Kawabata bungaku no shosō: Kindai no yūen* (Tokyo: Ōfūsha, 1983), p. 184.

author's creative mind felt an underlying necessity that compels the story as a whole to have certain consistency and harmony, but not the oppositions that might appear on the plot level. The domain of symbols that center on the two female characters, Yoko and Komako, offers a possibility of such reading. Concerning them, Kawabata testifies that, while Yoko is a product of his pure imagination, Komako is modeled on someone even though her characterization notably differs from the actual model.[8] Relevant here is not a search for a model's biographical data but the contrast that Komako's physical origin offers with Yoko's un-physical source.

At the beginning of the novel, the reader finds Yoko's presence on the train that comes out of a long tunnel into a snow-covered region at dusk. At this stage, Komako, referred to only as "the woman" in Shimamura's recollection and for many pages to come, is conspicuously missing, while the assiduous care for a sick, young man by "the girl," that is, Yoko, has been attracting his attention for a few hours. This situation is exceptional. For the rest of the novel, the story unfolds Shimamura's dragging relation with Komako, and Yoko's sporadic appearance tends to incite her displeasure. Nevertheless, the initial scene actually highlights Yoko's segmented beauty and Komako's recollected physicality. During his solitary ride on the train, Shimamura attempts to remember the woman, meaning Komako, in vain. With nothing else to do, he plays with his left hand and thinks that the hand alone, especially its index finger, "seemed to have a vital and immediate memory of the woman he was going to see."[9] In sharp contrast to this implied, keen sensuality of Komako's body, Yoko is viewed as the possessor of beauty detached from the body. Just a few lines after the story's onset, Shimamura is entranced to hear her call to a station master out of a nearby window with a voice that is later described repeatedly as clear and beautiful. Three hours earlier at twilight, she similarly impresses him with a sense of "something coolly piercing about her beauty." Then, surprised to see one of her eyes reflected on the half transparent window, he is even more moved "at the inexpressible beauty," "not of this world," when "a distant, cold light" in the background mountains glimmers through the

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[8] Kawabata repeatedly made this statement. See, for instance, his "Dokuei jimei," pp. 387-388.

[9] Kawabata Yasunari, *Snow Country*, trans. Edward G. Seidensticker (New York: Vintage International, 1996), p. 7. Unless otherwise noted, all references to this text are to this edition.

pupil.[10] Thus, already at the beginning of the story, Komako's tangible being is clearly contrasted to Yoko's aerial nature.

Komako stands for passion of the desiring/desired body, whereas Yoko is a voice or a cold, distant light without a body. Shimamura stands between them at first as an observer of their unresolved conflict concerning Yukio who is the sick young man on the train, then increasingly as the object of their rivalry. In other words, the man with the narrative perspective himself functions as a half-transparent mirror that reflects on his consciousness the evolving dynamism between two female forces, or as a camera lens that selectively determines the framework and all the detail of composition in it.[11] Significantly, however, the two women are closely related to each other rather than being simply contrasted as opposites. Suggestive of their correlation, Shimamura suddenly encounters Yoko's mirrored eye when he wipes the steam-clouded window with the forefinger of his left hand that alone assures him tactually of Komako's existence in recollection. Both Komako and Yoko combine, in reverse proportions, a quality of heat-induced intensity with the snowy nature of coldness. This paradox associating the two women, which can be traced throughout, defines the story's symbolic structure, and the women attract each other toward an eventual convergence, with Shimamura's consciousness positioning itself as a medium for resolving their almost elemental confrontation.

Several levels of this symbolism involve the two females, starting with their names. While the name Yoko (*yō*=leaf) suggests static, fragile, non-animal life, Komako (*koma*=horse), the occupational sobriquet of the other woman whose real name is never given, readily stands for unrestrained vitality in the body and emotions. More important than the names is what the two women are. Komako is a geisha, a professional who performs entertaining arts, and who sells her acquired talents to a customer like Shimamura who can afford her time-measured service. In contrast,

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[10] Kawabata, *Snow Country*, pp. 8-10.

[11] Stating that "[o]bviously, the camera is Shimamura," Richard Torrance discusses Kawabata's interest in cinema, including the usage of "[a] technique resembling montage," in "Popular Languages in *Yukiguni*," in Alan Tansman and Dennis Washburn, eds., *Studies in Modern Japanese Literature: Essays and Translations in Honor of Edwin McClellan* (Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 1997), pp. 252-254.

Yoko is presented as a girl with no substantial merit. Apart from her claim to have been a would-be nurse in Tokyo, she does not have any specialized skills, intermittently working either in non-field odd agricultural labor or in non-customer-serving functions at a hot spring inn. Unlike Komako who has become a geisha to pay for Yukio's medical bills and might also support her unsteady income, she is free insomuch as she is not bound to any profession by a contract or a debt. Despite little difference in age, Yoko is essentially an artless late teenager whose undeveloped, yet earnest mentality verges on idiocy or childlike simplicity, while Komako is a young adult thoroughly familiar with the way of the world. Many interspersed references, including those to dying insects and a senior co-worker named Kikuyū who quits her job because of trouble with a man, foreshadow Komako's fated maturation as a woman of unfortunate circumstances.[12] Thus, in terms of occupations, financial obligation, and maturity, they stand in sharp contrast to each other.

The difference typically manifests itself in what kinds of songs the two women sing. At one point, Komako performs for Shimamura one of the traditional geisha repertoire that she has practiced all by herself through radio and music scores in the absence of an able teaching master. She accompanies her song with a stringed instrument, the *shamisen*, which is another traditional geisha attribute. She is expected to learn how to play it. Her strong-willed professionalism in a situation where her efforts can hardly be rewarded or appreciated strikes Shimamura as futilely beautiful, a main sentiment he repeatedly feels about her way of life. In comparison, he hears Yoko singing twice in the story: during his walk when she is thrashing red beans on the roadside; and then in the hotel when she helps a child of the hotel owner to take a bath. On both occasions, Yoko's songs are simple folk songs that she supposedly learned artlessly in her childhood and has the habit of singing to herself while engaged in some tasks. In fact, from the very first moment she calls to the station master out of a train window, Shimamura tends to hear her voice as a kind of natural music that does not require any training.

[12] As to Kikuyū as an adumbration of the future Komako, see Hirayama Mitsuo, "*Yukiguni* nenritsu ron no shiten kara," *Kyojitsu no himaku: Yukiguni, Kōgen, Bokka*, in Kawabata bungaku kenkyūkai ed., Kawabata Yasunari kenkyū sōsho, vol. 5 (Tokyo: Kyōiku shuppan sentaa, 1979), pp. 20-21; and Tsuruta Kin'ya, *Kawabata Yasunari no geijutsu: Junsui to kyūsai*, Kokubungaku kenkyū sōsho (Tokyo: Meiji shoin, 1981), pp. 83-84.

Shimamura gets attracted not to Yoko's physical presence as a whole but to her voice as well as to her eyes. While, as a mode of professional entertainment, Komako's singing presupposes an audience even though a rural resort area does not abound in music connoisseurship, Yoko does not sing on any public occasion. Shimamura overhears her songs that are open to anybody who happens to be nearby. This demonstrates her essential aloofness from others. Even when he finds himself face to face with her, he is at once fascinated and kept away by her eyes that he always feels are piercingly beautiful. In addition to the glimmering eyes, her mask-like, exceedingly earnest face short of expressed emotions helps to keep him at a distance. Her aloofness thus produced is not coincidental. Compared with almost ever-present Komako, Yoko is basically absent from the story except for short, infrequent appearances. In this way, in spite of being an individual character, she is actually represented by two elements of the body alone, a trait that reminds us of one of Kawabata's later works, *The Arm* [Kataude] (1963). But, unlike the detached arm that nevertheless persists to imply the rest of the absent body in the novella, Yoko's voice and the light of her eyes are not body parts but unsubstantial acoustic waves and optical, reflected rays that emanate from the body. Komako's physical features are intimately observed, and even her voice represents "an extended vibration of her flesh."[13] In sharp contrast, Yoko embodies, without a solid body, "the star on the night sky" as a clear light that flickers in the distance,[14] or a haunting echo to which her beautiful voice is often compared.[15] The author perceives her character metaphorically "blinking on

[13] Liman, "Kawabata's Lyrical Mode in *Snow Country*," p. 277.

[14] Satake Isamu, "Kawabata bungaku ni okeru 'kagami' ni tsuite: *Yukiguni* to *Suigetsu* o chūshin ni," *Kōka joshi daigaku kenkyū kiyō* 19 (1981), p. 63.

[15] Referring to the comparison of Yoko's voice to an echo, Kin'ya Tsuruta points out the etymology of an echo [*kodama*] as an arboreal spirit, in "The Flow-Dynamics in Kawabata Yasunari's *Snow Country*," *Monumenta Nipponica* 26/3-4 (1971), p. 254. Thomas E. Swann agrees, calling her an Oread, in "Kawabata no *Yukiguni* no kōsei," in Matsuura Katsuo, trans., *Kawabata Yasunari: Gendai no biishiki*, in Takeda Katsuhiko and Takahashi Shintarō, eds., Kokubungaku kenkyū sōsho (Tokyo: Meiji shoin, 1978), pp. 20-21. See also Kawasaki Toshihiko, "Yume ka utsutsu ka maboroshi ka: *Yukiguni* to kyōzō no bigaku," Yukiguni *no bunseki kenkyū*, in Hasegawa Izumi and Tsuruta Kin'ya, eds. Kenkyū sōsho, vol. 4 (Tokyo: Kyōiku shuppan sentaa, 1985), p. 21; and Moriyasu Masafumi, *Kawabata*

and off" as a frail light, while Thomas E. Swann thinks that Yoko only represents "celestial beauty or what is unknown and mysterious."[16] Bodiless, she lacks capability to support herself.[17] Her intense earnestness approaching idiocy or infantilism derives from her star-like ethereal intangibility, because such extreme purity and simplicity defy logical argument and self-interested calculation.

Some critics attempt to demonstrate Yoko's physical existence. For instance, Akatsuka Masayuki argues that Yoko "lives in day-to-day reality with one physical body," citing the urinal she carries from Yukio's sickroom.[18] The urinal, however, is utilized as a tool to contextualize her in particular social circumstances on the plot level, and the body part that should hold it is deftly left unmentioned. Likewise, Kawasaki Toshihiko pays attention to Yoko's hand holding Yukio's on the train as an example of her physical reality.[19] But the text actually describes Yukio's emaciated hand tightly holding Yoko's, thereby making her hand covered and much less visible. The plot does demand that Yoko the character possess physicality to interact with her surroundings, but the text carefully avoids making direct references to her corporality. Her figure unencumbered with physical weightiness is thus secured.

If Shimamura's perception reduces Yoko to the purity of light and voice, he invariably views Komako as a presence of cleanness for the better part of the story. As a professional woman of entertaining arts, she cannot

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Yasunari: Horobi no bungaku (Tokyo: Kokusho kankōkai, 1989), pp. 320-321, 334.

[16] Kawabata, "Dokuei jimei," p. 391; and Swann, "Kawabata no *Yukiguni* no kōsei," p. 21.

[17] Ueda Makoto, "*Yukiguni* no sakihin kōzō," *Kyojitsu no himaku*, vol. 5, pp. 82, 89. See also Hasegawa, *Kawabata Yasunari*, p. 105; Tsuruta, *Kawabata Yasunari no geijutsu*, p. 73; Hayashi Takeshi, *Kawabata Yasunari*, Kanshō Nihon gendai bungaku, vol. 15, ed. Hayashi Takeshi (Tokyo: Kadokawa shoten, 1982), p. 140; and Tsuruta Kin'ya, "*Yukiguni*," *Kokubungaku kaishaku to kanshō* 56/9 (1991), p. 88.

[18] Akatsuka Masayuki, "*Yukiguni* ron," in Shigematsu Yasuo, ed., *Genkei to shazō: Kindai Nihon bungaku ronkō* (Fukuoka, Japan: Genkei to shazō kankōkai, 1986), p. 458.

[19] Kawasaki Toshihiko, "Kawabata Yasunari *Yukiguni*: Yuki to hi to," *Kawabata Yasunari*, in Nihon bungaku kenkyū shiryō kankōkai, ed., *Nihon bungaku kenkyū shiryō sōsho* (Tokyo: Yūseidō, 1973), pp. 188-189.

be pure like the virgin figure Yoko, and he never calls her beautiful in the same way as he does with Yoko. But she is described as exceptionally clean in the impression she gives as well as in the tidiness of her everyday life from the very first moment of their encounter. As Tsuruta Kin'ya points out, the cleanness that defines Komako applies to a solid matter while Yoko's purity does not accompany a body.[20] Shimamura is initially attracted to Komako because he finds her too clean as an object to satisfy his pent-up desires. Kawabata sometimes used this technique to create the cleansed, likeable image of a "tainted" woman figure. For instance, at the end of a palm-of-the-hand story titled "The Morning Nail" [Asa no tsume] (1926), the author implies a fresh start in marriage of a poor, young prostitute by placing her in the midst of a new, white mosquito net that is compared to a lotus bloom.

In *Snow Country*, a device to symbolize Komako's cleanness on the surface is the whiteness of snow that is often associated with her carefully powdered skin. The cosmetic powder is applied on the exposed face and neck in order to cover, in her case, not a dark complexion or a rough skin but fresh redness of the healthy body. The color is inborn to Komako who grew up in the snowy mountain area, often enhanced by drunkenness or a sudden shift of emotions. At their reunion after a lapse of several months, Shimamura finds a part of her face "red under the thick powder," which reminds him of "the snow-country cold," and yet he feels "a certain warmth in it."[21] In fact, aware of her warm bodily temperature, she even calls herself, when heavily inebriated, a metaphorical "pillow of fire."[22] The underlying red visible through a clean white layer is indicative of her robust, unspoiled health that dispels her professional stain and, more significantly, of her intense passion and fundamental life force.[23] Next morning after the reunion, a scene involving another mirror further relates

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[20] Tsuruta Kin'ya, *Kawabata Yasunari ron*, Sekai no Nihon bungaku series, vol. 4 (Tokyo: Meiji shoin, 1988), p. 110.
[21] Kawabata, *Snow Country*, p. 39.
[22] Author's translation of Kawabata Yasunari, *Yukiguni, Kawabata Yasunari zenshū*, vol. 10, p. 99. Kawabata used this phrase as the title of an independently published segment of the story, indicating the importance of this metaphor.
[23] See Kawamoto Kōji, "Geisha no koi: Janru shōsetsu toshite no *Yukiguni*," in Hirakawa Sukehiro and Tsuruta Kin'ya, eds., *Nihon bungaku no tokushitsu* (Tokyo: Meiji shoin, 1991), p. 293.

Komako to snow and the color red. At sunrise, Shimamura sees her face and the snow outside reflected together on a mirror of his room, with her "bright red cheeks" sharply contrasted to the surrounding snow that appears to be "burning icily."[24] Later in the story, the same motif appears once and again in the form of, for instance, colored red leaves covered with the first snow on the mountains. Her occasionally glimpsed undergarment, which is traditionally red under the geisha kimono, might externalize the innate color in her case.

Evidently, the two mirror scenes early in the novel, each of which reveals the reflected image of a female character set against the surrounding landscape, are intended to enhance the two women's marked difference that is hinted in the first mirror scene. Yoko's eye glimmers ephemerally with a superimposed distant fire while the rest of her translucent image floats amidst the indistinct, constantly moving wilderness. Komako's body that exudes vitality with red luster forms a vivid, matching contrast to the radiant snow, thereby emphasizing its solid contour. While Yoko's essence is reducible to a cold, aloof light, Komako stands for the soft, clean, thick layer of snow that covers their village during a long winter. Together, clear, distant light and white, embracing snow constitute a cloudless, serene winter night of the region, such as what the evening in the ending would be like if it were not for the fire. At the same time, like a hot spring in the snowy locale, both cases contain a paradox of inherent warmth in a cold element, dually as characters and symbols of purity and cleanness. No matter how remote and heatless the wild or starry light appears, it originates in fire. As to Komako who "hides a consuming fire within her cool, clean exterior,"[25] redness inherently underlies the white, snowy covering. Because of the vehement passion inside, her initial, strenuous effort to maintain a professional distance from Shimamura fails dismally. For all her isolationist demeanor, Yoko interests Shimamura at first with her tender, undistracted nursing of the sick Yukio on the train, then with her frequent visits to his grave and motherly care of the innkeeper's small daughter in bathing. Komako also likes looking after the same girl and other children.

Although Yoko and Komako exhibit remarkable difference, they are not presented as two opposing incompatibles. They rather share certain traits and complement each other, which the ecological symbiosis on the level of naming hints, with Yoko's formation as "flora in harmonious

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[24] Kawabata, *Snow Country*, p. 48.
[25] Tsuruta, "The Flow-Dynamics," p. 255.

rivalry with Komako as fauna."[26] Despite their strained relationship, they need each other. They live together with Yukio until he dies in the house of his mother who is Komako's palsied music teacher. Komako, who considers Yoko likely to be her future burden, apparently supports Yoko at least partially on a financial basis even when they no longer share a living space. In conversation with Shimamura, each expresses her concern with the other's future welfare, hoping that Shimamura will take good care of the other woman.

The seemingly unrelated episode about *chijimi* linen further reinforces this symbiotic relation. Late in the autumn, before the story's final scene, Shimamura takes a short train ride to a few villages where the special fabric was once produced. The production of fine *chijimi* required both nimble, diligent hands of unmarried girls between fifteen and twenty five and direct exposure to snow in the very cold weather. Shimamura, who wears it as his summer kimono and undershirt, feels a special attachment to this textile because of the young weavers' labor and the sense of coolness it offers. In his associative, dilettantish mind, *chijimi* stands both for Yoko and for Komako. The fabric was woven by young girls like Yoko, whom he actually imagines having sung at work over her handloom if she had been born decades ago. Like Komako's *shamisen* performance, art and nature conspired to create the fabric with an acquired skill in the rural, mountainous environment. A city dweller like Shimamura who can afford and appreciate the fabric wears it only seasonally, as he occasionally visits to enjoy her service at his convenience.

The idea that *chijimi* retains the coolness of snow in summer's heat holds deeper significance. In addition to the paradoxical nature that recalls a similar trait in the two women, the narration explains, citing an old local history book,[27] that *chijimi* involves snow in every process of its production, including spinning, weaving, and bleaching. Shimamura sends his *chijimi* garments to the snow country every winter to have them bleached in a traditional, rigorous method that exposes them to snow and the cold air after an overnight soak and early morning wash for several days. *Chijimi* thus derives its distinct coolness and cleanness from the two women's phenomenal extensions: ground-covering snow and the freezing

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[26] Hasegawa Izumi, "Kindai bungakushi ni okeru *Yukiguni* no ichi," *Kyojitsu no himaku*, vol. 5, p. 103.

[27] Kawabata read *Hokuetsu sekifu* (1836) by Suzuki Bokushi after he wrote the early, prewar version of *Snow Country*.

air that the star-lit, clear night sky brings. In Shimamura's imagination aided by the information that the old book provides, the white linen turns vermilion with the surrounding snow at dawn, similar to Komako's face in the second mirror scene. He naturally compares Komako to the special cloth, feeling her "at center cool" with "remarkable, concentrated warmth."[28] As part of his aesthetic, sentimental indulgence, he even considers his relation with her to be of shorter duration than a piece of *chijimi* worn over decades with care. As the snow that regionally exists during the long winter underlies local people's psyche even in summer, so does Komako's being constantly imply snow, bringing forth his longing for her as well as his dreamy perspective on the snow country when he stays away in Tokyo during warm seasons.

It is evident that Shimamura regards Komako as a kind of human *chijimi*, and that he expects from her not only sensual/sensuous pleasure but also a sense of being cleansed by an embrace that is at once cool and warm. When he wears *chijimi* linen in summer, he relishes visualizing the beauty of *chijimi* spread out and dyed with the color of sunrise, feeling "that the dirt of the summer had been washed away, even that he himself had been bleached clean."[29] He needs that sense, because he is socially useless, considered a critic of the Western dance or ballet, the stage performance of which he has never seen, thereby earning little livelihood and probably living on inherited wealth. Cynically aware of his position, he escapes from the city of dreary married life to a remote hot spring, primarily to enjoy Komako's company. As a man of typical modern sensitivity, however, he has a fundamental urge to be cleansed of self-loathing and regain "honesty with himself," initially by exposing himself to the pristine natural environment through mountain climbing, and later more intimately by way of Komako's healthy, impeccable cleanness.[30] He even receives a cleansing effect from her *shamisen* performance, which, in this sense, is "closer to religious salvation than music."[31] Terada Tōru states that "her cleanness resuscitates him rather than fascinates him" after he has come to physical contact with her.[32] He eventually realizes that he might have unknowingly

[28] Kawabata, *Snow Country*, p. 154.
[29] Ibid., p. 152.
[30] Ibid., p. 17. See Tsuruta, *Kawabata Yasunari no geijutsu*, p. 87.
[31] Tsuruta, *Kawabata Yasunari no geijutsu*, p. 70.
[32] Terada Tōru, "*Yukiguni* ron," *Kindai bungaku* 8/4 (1953), p. 62.

been using Komako, who now habitually clings to him, like his fantasized ballet and personal *chijimi* linen.

What he does not really understand is that Yoko is Komako's other self, not in appearance or temperament but in their competing yet complementary functions. Because Komako's character endowed with corporal femininity is "by no means compatible with ugliness," Kawasaki calls her "at once the opposite to and an extension of Yoko" and Yoko her metaphorical doppelgänger that reveals both identicalness and heterogeneity.[33] In a similar vein, other critics regard Yoko as Komako's "aspect," "repressed self," and "extension...ghost [of the bygone, lost self], and conscience," while the women are considered "originally one" or "almost tantamount to each other's alter ego."[34] The two of them in tandem form the whole of Shimamura's perceived snow country, the only *locus* that offers the cleansing effect he seeks. He needs not only Komako's exceptional cleanness but also Yoko's influence that lies behind it as a powerful source of purification. In a sense, since the two female characters reveal common elements along with sharply contrasted difference, their symbiotic relationship approaches the yin-yang system, with Komako foregrounded as the principle of light and Yoko mostly latent as the principle of darkness. The old local history book actually mentions yin-yang to explain the cool feeling one can savor in summer's heat when wearing the *chijimi* garment, the crucial symbol that entwines the implicitly paired women. As in the yin-yang symbol, both principles are needed to achieve an entirety of the desired purging of the excessive modern self-consciousness.

In this respect, Shimamura is Yukio's double, for the young man also finds himself placed between the two female competing yet complementary principles, although factual details of their triangular

[33] Kawasaki, "Kawabata Yasunari *Yukiguni*," p. 190; and Kawasaki, "Yume ka utsutsu ka maboroshi ka," pp. 16-25.

[34] Michael C. Brownstein, "Kawabata Yasunari's *Snow Country*," in Barbara Stoler Miller, ed., *Masterworks of Asian Literature in Comparative Perspective: A Guide for Teaching*, (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1994), p. 489; Tajima Yoko, "Komako no shiten kara yomu *Yukiguni*," in Etane Mitsuko and Shitsuta Kazuyo, eds., *Onna ga yomu Nihon kindai bungaku: Feminizumu hihyō no kokoromi* (Tokyo: Shin'yōsha, 1992), p. 167; Tsuruta, *Kawabata Yasunari no geijutsu*, pp. 82, 84; Hayashi, *Kawabata Yasunari*, p. 140; and Swann, "Kawabata no *Yukiguni* no kōsei," p. 21.

relationship, including Komako's rumored engagement to him, remain ambiguous and fragmentary. She and townspeople, such as a blind masseuse, ascribe his failed health and eventual death at the age of twenty six to his overworking as an evening school student in Tokyo and resulting intestinal tuberculosis. The presence of the two women in his life is supposed to have an effect of sweeping off the city dirt that has accumulated on him. On a symbolic level, however, he cannot sustain the combined intensity of two opposing forces of femininity, which, instead of removing the cause of his damaged health, consumes him gradually to his ultimate demise. After his death, without reflecting on herself, Komako half-jokingly calls Yoko frighteningly jealous by nature to the point of killing the object of her affection.[35]

Yukio and Shimamura are poised in a parallel situation particularly when Yoko rushes to the train station where Komako is seeing off the older man as a customer. Yoko urges Komako to come back immediately to the critically ill young man who wishes to see her for the last time. Either man is departing one way or another, subjected to the power of the two women at once, with Yoko in her simple, intense earnestness and Komako vehemently holding to her principle of cleanness by flatly refusing to witness death. Komako's strong reaction might partially stem from her ambivalence toward the two men,[36] but her almost Shinto-like rejection of death as a source of taint is so psychologically thorough that it causes in her a violent physical reaction of orally purging her interior, albeit without output.[37] At this critical juncture, the two male figures switch their

[35] Interestingly, she makes this short remark between the two written messages Yoko delivers to Shimamura upon her request, occasioning his only private talk with the younger woman. This illustrates the two women's ambivalent relationship that is at once interdependent and mutually antagonistic.

[36] In *Kawabata Yasunari ron*, p. 112 and *Kawabata Yasunari no geijutsu*, p. 101, Tsuruta ascribes her violent reaction to self-disgust caused by an internal conflict between clean self as Yukio's childhood friend and mature self in love with Shimamura.

[37] Komako is indeed associated with Shinto once when, followed by Shimamura, she walks into a shrine's precincts shortly after their initial acquaintance. According to her, it is the village's coolest place with a soothing breeze even in midsummer, which alludes to her own paradoxical nature as fire in the cold.

positions, with Yukio the passer forever gone as his name suggests,[38] and Shimamura the lone traveler taking the precarious place of converging forces. Afterwards, not to mention Komako who becomes more and more attached to Shimamura against her will, Yoko also shows more interest in him towards the end of the story. What happens at the train station when he is leaving for Tokyo thus foreshadows the ending scene.

In the novel's last scene of a winter evening, Komako and Shimamura rush to a warehouse used also as a theater on fire, and they realize that Yoko is still inside. Calling this scene "a beautiful fiction," "a surrealistic world of recollection," and a "fantastic scene...in daydream-like brightness,"[39] critics regard the ending as unrealistic. This is partly due to the surrealistic merging of the fire with descending stars, and partly to the unnatural action/inaction of the two female characters. Evidently, Shimamura's perception is largely responsible for this unreality. The previous year, during his second night with Komako, he found the star-filled nocturnal sky inharmonious with the dark yet snow-covered landscape. Now, significantly at her beckoning, he looks up at the Milky Way.[40] While the situation is tense with a collapsing building, excited people's commotion, and possibility of a fatal accident, Shimamura is entranced, as usual, to see an illusion of fire, erupted from the thinly snowed ground, merging with the magnificent Milky Way that runs vividly across the sky. Rather than uproar, he senses a kind of quietude immersing the entire, disastrous site.

In this mindset, he feels himself "pulled up" between the Milky Way that "seemed to dip and flow" into the fire and the sparks of the fire that "spread off into the Milky Way."[41] His consciousness is finally being cleansed and purified by the two kinds of flames metaphoric of Komako's

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[38] Tsuruta, *Kawabata Yasunari no geijutsu*, p. 101. Tsuruta also understands Yukio as a character who functions, without a single line of speech of his own, to induce and enhance Komako's cleanness and Yoko's purity based on their unrewarded self-sacrifice to him, in Kawabata, "*Yukiguni*," pp. 89-90; and Tsuruta, *Kawabata Yasunari ron*, pp. 103-115.

[39] Hasegawa, *Kawabata Yasunari ronkō*, p. 342; Isogai Hideo, "*Yukiguni* no shasei," *Kawabata Yasunari: Gendai no biishiki*, p. 37. Needless to say, it is irrelevant here to speculate upon the historical veracity of this fire in Kawabata's life.

[40] See Hirayama, "*Yukiguni* no kyo to jitsu," p. 131.

[41] Kawabata, *Snow Country*, p. 171.

and Yoko's influences. The fire in snow symbolizes an eruption of Komako's passion that, synonymous with underlying red, has largely been suppressed until now. Mishima Yukio, who probably understood Kawabata as a fellow contemporary writer better than anybody else, reportedly made a pointed insight in a dialogue with him, calling the fire "the novel's most basic image" because "Komako herself is something like a fire in snow."[42] Or, as Kawasaki puts it, "her unrequited passion" translates into the blaze, which itself is her "last, and greatest metaphor."[43] In response to the upward outburst of flame, the star dust, vicarious of Yoko's essence as a cold, distant fire, flows down to the mid-air into which Shimamura's imagination lifts itself up. The celestial and earthly flames appear to vie for his floating mind while finally meeting to forge its transmutation from opposite directions.

When the fire in snow externalizes Komako's passion, why does the ultimate metaphor of Yoko, who tends to stay in the background, assume such a cosmic dimension as the Milky Way? This Milky Way, in which Shimamura feels "a terrible voluptuousness," is "clearly endowed with a female persona."[44] Due to Komako's prominence in the last scene, some critics associate her with the Milky Way,[45] which nevertheless fails to prove a sustained correlation between her and stars. It is Yoko who is linked to starry light throughout the story, and a certain parallel in the fire scene can also be drawn between Yoko and the Milky Way, such as linear stretch, descent toward the ground, and the disarrayed hem. The reason, however, lies deeper on three levels. First, her essence of a cold, remote fire clearly corresponds with "the distant, chilly Milky Way."[46] As Richard C. Buckstead states, there is "a direct correlation" of her image on the first mirror with the Milky Way of the concluding scene, because Yoko as a symbol "relates to the stars and planets."[47] In addition, recognizing

[42] Kawasaki, "Kawabata Yasunari *Yukiguni*," pp. 195-196.
[43] Kawasaki, "Yume ka utsutsu ka maboroshi ka," pp. 24-25.
[44] Kawabata, *Snow Country*, p. 165; and Tsuruta, *Kawabata Yasunari no geijutsu*, pp. 91-92.
[45] See, for instance, Kawasaki, "Kawabata Yasunari *Yukiguni*," pp. 197-198.
[46] Liman, "Kawabata's Lyrical Mode in *Snow Country*," p. 283.
[47] Richard C. Buckstead, "The Search for a Symbol in Kawabata's 'Snow Country,'" *Asian Profile* 1/1 (1973), p. 160.

occasionally "a certain voluptuous charm" in her,[48] Shimamura is attracted to Yoko not for purely aesthetic reasons. His interest is tinged with "something vaguely erotic," and, in spite of her "distant, cold inaccessibility like that of a star...Yoko is symbolically a sexual experience" for him, however sterile that experience might be.[49]

Second, as a symbol of purity with purifying force, Yoko epitomizes the virginal figure that persists in charming male protagonists throughout Kawabata's oeuvre, starting with the eponymous teenager in *The Izu Dancer* [Izu no odoriko] (1926). As Tsuruta states, "the women in *Snow Country* are the manifested images of male desire."[50] If Komako stands for an archetypal female with a matured body accessible to male desire, Yoko typifies the virgin that remains "still unravish'd" as the object of devout, yet sexually implicit adoration, at least until the story reaches the final scene.[51] Yoko is considered a "sacred" or "eternal" virgin that Maria and a bodhisattva represent, even compared to Kaguya-hime in *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter* [Taketori monogatari] (the late ninth century) whom Kawabata adored.[52] In more human terms, she stands for "the ideal of

[48] Kawabata, *Snow Country*, p. 57.
[49] Buckstead, "The Search for a Symbol in Kawabata's 'Snow Country,'" p. 160.
[50] Tsuruta, "*Yukiguni*," p. 90.
[51] John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn," l. 1, in Jack Stillinger, ed., *The Poems of John Keats* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 372. Mishima Yukio ascribes Kawabata's interest in the virginal figure to "the mechanism in which she is eternally inviolable as long as she remains to be a virgin although, when violated, she is no longer a virgin," in "Eien no tabibito," *Bungei dokuhon Kawabata Yasunari*, Kawade paperbacks, vol. 16 (Tokyo: Kawade shobō shinsha, 1962), p. 10.
[52] See Kobayashi Yoshihito, *Bi to Bukkyō to jidō bungaku to: Kawabata Yasunari no sekai* (Tokyo: Sōbunsha, 1985), pp. 212-214; Ueda, "*Yukiguni* no sakihin kōzō," *Kyojitsu no himaku*, vol. 5, p. 91; Tsuruta, *Kawabata Yasunari no geijutsu*, p. 73; Tsuruta, "*Yukiguni*," pp. 88, 90; Tsuruta, *Kawabata Yasunari ron*, p. 108; Tajima, "Komako no shiten kara yomu *Yukiguni*," p. 151; and Yamada Yoshirō, "*Yukiguni* ni okeru Yoko zō," *Tōhoku daigaku bungei kenkyū* 97 (1981): 50-51.

virginal purity" or "the ultimate of a pure female character."[53] The two female archetypes, however, do not stand on an equal basis in the sense that every woman of the first type once belonged to the second type without exception. In other words, the physical type presupposes the virginal figure, and the latter envelopes the former in its wider base.

As part of their characterization, Yoko and Komako share the motherly tenderness that implies the third female type idealized by male fantasy. For instance, Shimamura would not be attracted to Yoko nursing Yukio "like a young mother" on the train "unless he had a strong, latent desire to be likewise cared for."[54] Similarly, on his first night with Komako, he feels motherly warmth in the palm placed upon her bosom. But motherliness remains a relatively minor element that connects the two women sharply contrasted in terms of physical (in)accessibility.

The third point relates to symbolism in the women's naming. In addition to the horse, Komako is associated with other forms of animal life, especially a variety of insects, such as moths. She is also closely linked to the silkworm or the larva of a domesticated moth from the very first moment of her encounter with Shimamura. Summoned by him for the first time before she becomes a full-fledged geisha, she comes to his hotel room out of a cocoon warehouse used also as the town's theater where a large party is taking place. Later, he visits her room that used to house silkworms. Unsteady as he feels as if suspended in the air, he finds the old attic room to be thoroughly clean like the inhabitant due to her minute care, even directly comparing her to a silkworm whose body turns translucent when it is ready to close itself up in a cocoon. As Swann points out, the cocoonery always has to be kept very clean because "an unsanitary environment is the silkworm's greatest enemy."[55] Here, considering the silkworm clean in association with its habitat and the end product, the traditional Japanese fondness for silk overlaps Shimamura's fascination with Komako. Finally,

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[53] Brownstein, "Kawabata Yasunari's *Snow Country*," p. 489; Yamada, "*Yukiguni* ni okeru Yoko zō," p. 51.

[54] Kawabata, *Snow Country*, p. 6; and Nakazawa Kei, "Shimamura to iu okoto: *Yukiguni*," *Shinchō* 89/6 (1992), p. 281. See also Tajima, "Komako no shiten kara yomu *Yukiguni*," p. 151; Kawasaki, "Yume ka utsutsu ka maboroshi ka," pp. 21-23; Tsuruta, *Kawabata Yasunari ron*, pp. 104-105; Tsuruta, *Kawabata Yasunari no geijutsu*, pp. 71-72, 81-82; and Tsuruta, "*Yukiguni*," p. 88.

[55] Swann, "Kawabata no *Yukiguni* no kōsei," p. 26.

the inflammable film sets the cocoon warehouse on fire when movies are screened, and Komako rushes “back” into the burning structure, like a moth in the wild, to rescue the inert Yoko single-handedly. In imagery, Komako is further connected to the silkworm in terms of the whiteness of thread it produces as well as the delicateness of woven cloth, apart from the material difference from *chijimi*. Similar to the horse/leaf symbiosis, although artificially manipulated, the silkworm requires a large quantity of mulberry leaves to produce thread, while the mulberry tree multiplies as the source of a thriving local industry for the luxury market. Therefore, symbolically as a leaf on the foundation of the food chain, Yoko, whose actual economic basis is never specified, feeds Komako as the growing silkworm that depends on an inexhaustible supply of regenerative vegetation.

By the time of Shimamura’s third visit, the two women undergo changes unpalatable to his fantasizing, causing him to feel “anxiety and even a chill.”[56] Komako becomes physically matured, emotionally trammeled, preoccupied with monetary concerns, and socially unscrupulous about her liaison with him. Not impressing him with a sense of exceptional cleanness as before, she increasingly gets “soiled” with aging, experience, and his metaphorical use of her as human *chijimi*. At the same time, Yoko no longer stays in the background as a figure to be savored at a distance. She asserts herself in a direct conversation with him, expressing at once her hatred of and sympathy with Komako. She even expresses a request for him to take her to the city, almost like elopement. At the end of the story, the time is ripe for the inherently signifying vehicles of symbolization to be released from the social/physical attributes with which the characters are equipped.

It is the ignited film that unleashes potential forces in the respective women. The silkworm references indicate that Komako as a metaphoric silkworm has always found herself socio-economically encapsulated within such manmade shells as the theater/cocoon warehouse and her first room in which silkworms were raised not long ago. The burning of the warehouse dismantles the confinement, releasing her essence from the artificial shell and metamorphosing her into an unrestrained flame of passion instead of an expected moth. In fact, the fire has a smell similar to the cocoon boiling, with which to kill off the pupa as a process of thread

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[56] Yamada, “*Yukiguni* ni okeru Yoko zō,” p. 47. See also Swann, “Kawabata no *Yukiguni* no kōsei,” p. 27; Ueda, “*Yukiguni* no sakihin kōzō,” pp. 86-89; and Tsuruta, *Kawabata Yasunari no geijutsu*, p. 98.

harvest. This implies the termination of Komako as a grown silkworm as well as the removal of her accumulated stain by fire at the end.[57] At the story's onset, Yoko is caught as a tenuous, intangible image superimposed on a half-transparent train window against the shifting background landscape as part of a cinematic composition. She stays trapped in her own way as "a virtual image" or "a mere image of the body" centering on the eye and the voice within this cinematic framework throughout the story.[58] The accidental ignition of the celluloid film liberates and magnifies her essence of a cold, distant fire into a gigantic arch of stars stretched full across the night sky. As Shimamura observes, it is the bright, untamed, profound Milky Way that Matsuo Bashō views over the rough oceanic expanse in one of his most celebrated *haiku* poems.

On the level of human action, the two women meet for a final resolution. As the Milky Way appears to pour down, so Yoko's horizontally stretched body makes a short fall from the low upstairs onto the ground, and, disregarding her own safety, Komako runs into the building on fire to hold it. Yoko remains unconscious in a transitional state, notably with the piercingly beautiful eyes closed. By coming down to the ground level of ordinary reason, her figure as an embodiment of purity can no longer be sustained in the realm of everyday consciousness. Shimamura thus feels a certain fundamental change, rather than death, taking place in her motionless body. Suggestive of the change, he notices a spasmodic movement in the bared calf as a result of the fall, which is the text's only straightforward reference to her un-abstracted exposed body part, except for the tightly grasped, hardly visible hand in kinetic action. More directly, holding Yoko in her arms, Komako shouts out just a few lines before the story's closure that the girl is going insane. Actually, as her impulsive action like a mad woman suggests, Komako is also losing her old self.[59] By finally accepting Yoko without reservation, she destroys the subtle balance of mutual antagonism and dependence that has defined their identities on both human and symbolic levels.

At the critical moment of two women's lives, Shimamura indulges himself in his aestheticism. As in the first mirror scene, which he recalls with a thrill at Yoko's closed eyes, he finds in her falling body "a phantasm

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[57] See Tsuruta, *Kawabata Yasunari no geijutsu*, pp. 78-81, 87-88, 91.
[58] Tajima, "Komako no shiten kara yomu *Yukiguni*," p. 168; and Ueda, "*Yukiguni* no sakihin kōzō," p. 77.
[59] See Hayashi, *Kawabata Yasunari*, p. 142.

from an unreal world."[60] He further associates the fire scene with the story's beginning by setting his memory of the wild fire flared through Yoko's eye several months ago against the time that he has spent with Komako, that is, the novel's temporal entirety. At the very end, he feels again "the Milky Way flow[ing] down inside him with a roar,"[61] thereby supposedly completing his own inner metamorphosis at the expense of the two women. As Komako mentions earlier about glowing charcoal brought from the sick man's room, fire has the power to keep itself clean and eliminate a tainting source. The open-ended quality of the ending might suggest that, consumed by the two cleaning/purifying flames to a symbolic death as they brought about Yukio's physical end, Shimamura's psyche undergoes the cleansing and rebirth he has always been seeking. With his fundamental wish finally satisfied, he feels that it is time for him to leave Komako and the snow country.

From the perspective of the conventional Western reading of the form, the novel *Snow Country* appears to lack the genre's essential element, that is, a consistently evolving story line based on a series of conflict-fraught actions with a well-defined beginning, a logically following middle, and a clear, unifying ending. When we look into the symbiotic confrontation that involves the two main female characters, however, even apparently disjoined sections, such as the deviational *chijimi* episode and the inconclusive fire scene at the end, prove not only integral but indispensable to the work's formation as a novelistic whole. It is not quite certain whether and to what extent the author himself was aware of this symbolic structure. Dissatisfied with the kind of plot structure terminable at almost any moment, however, Kawabata's creative mind actually demanded a definite, climactic ending that corresponds well with the beginning and gives a final coherent settlement to the gradually unfolded story. It is irrelevant, then, to debate whether the story remains unfinished or to surmise a sequence he might have written after the given closure.[62] In spite of some residual uneasiness due to unsolved details of the characters' fates

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[60] Kawabata, *Snow Country*, p. 173.

[61] Ibid., p. 175.

[62] In "Dokuei jimei," p. 391, Kawabata mentions "Komako who lives nursing the mad Yoko" as an image of their post-factum lives that the ending conjures up on his mind. In his strenuous revision extending over decades, however, he never chose to make any addition to the given ending with this image.

and their unrealistic portrayals, the author sensed that the story is complete with the fire scene where symbols are mobilized on a grand scale, elemental as well as cosmic, to the full realization of their potentiality.