KAWABATA’S “OTHER WORLD” IN SNOW COUNTRY

“UNREAL” AND “OTHER”

- Not really separate from this world, as in Plato’s realm of Forms or the Jewish/Christian/Muslim notion of a transcendental Heaven.
- I prefer to think of it as another “dimension” to this world. It is different from the concrete, common sense world; it is something that we can’t understand or perceive in the normal way. Thus it seems like “other” world and “unreal,” a sort of symbolic world not of this world.” (9).
- Yet it is interconnected with the concrete world. The “mirror scene” on the train suggests this: the overlay of the sensual face with the mountains beyond. “the mirror and the reflected figures like motions pictures superimposed one on the other. 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). In the “fire scene” at the end of the book the “transcendent” Milky Way pulls Shimamura up into it and it flows into Shimamura: he experience that interconnection.
- The recurring theme of “distance” suggests this relationship: our phenomenal world extends into the distant “other world” or dimension beyond. That other world is not at a specific point in space but is the dimension where space becomes unbounded, infinite, beyond the normal sense of space. In the mirror episode, Yoko and Yukio are both concrete individuals in a train, and yet it was “as if the two of them, quite insensitive to space, meant to go on forever, farther and farther into the distance” (9).
- Much of the power of Snow Country is in the tension between the sensuality of the phenomenal world (the beauties of nature and human sexuality) and the dimension beyond. In the final scene the central image is the Milky Way, which both functions as a symbol of the timeless dimension and is described as “voluptuous” and ravages Shimamura.
- The notion of another dimension that goes beyond space, time, and normal consciousness goes back to two religious ideas: the Daoist notion of Nonbeing from which the concrete world comes into being and returns, and the Buddhist notion of Emptiness which, like the sky, contains all phenomenal things but is also beyond their concreteness and limitations.

ASSOCIATIONS AND IMAGES

WINDOW.

- This is an important image throughout the book.
- A window, like a gate, has a doubled quality. On the one hand, it distinguishes inside from outside and separates the two. But it is also a place where inside and outside are connected – if it is opened.
- At various points in the novel, Yoko or Komako open the window or stand by it. At one point Komako opens the window, sits in it, and seems “as if she meant to throw herself out.” (99) 
- Coming through the window are distant sounds and cold, both images of the dimension beyond.
- The windows “were part of nature, and part of some distant world.” (57)

MIRROR

- The window also serves as translucent mirror – an image of two realities interconnected. It functions to help us see both what is inside the train (the concrete world) and what is outside (the beyond, symbolized by the mountains at night)
For other references to a mirror, see pages 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 23, 24, 48, 57, 62, 63, 73, 85, 86, 108, 134, 143, and 149.

**COLOR**

- The two dimensions (the concrete/sensual and the dimension beyond) are symbolized by red and white, respectively. The combination of red and white recurs through the book.
- White is also a symbol for purity, and the dimension beyond is free of the taints of human desires and failings.
- Perhaps ironically, both black (as in the dark colorless night sky) and white (snow, stars) suggest the dimension beyond.
- The aesthetic term yūgen is derived from a Chinese term for the essential color of the universe: dark purple. That color appears on page 85. We can think of purple as deep black (or dark blue) with a hint of red.
- Also traditional in Japanese aesthetics is the light of late dusk, when the last color and light is fading into the night. “The solid, integral shape of the mountain, taking up the whole of the evening landscape there at the end of the plain, was set off in a deep purple against the pale light of the sky. The moon was no longer an afternoon white, but, faintly colored, it had not yet taken on the clear coldness of the winter night” (85-86).

**SOUND**

- Sound is real but non-substantial. It is not a specific thing in an identifiable space, and cannot be seen. Thus it suggests the dimension beyond.
- The most powerful image of sound is on page 155, with the sound of pine breezes and bell beyond.
- One of Kawabata’s famous novels is called The Sound of the Mountain.
- Here are some instances of sound in Snow Country: 3-5, 30, 31, 33, 34, 41, 44, 49, 56, 155, 159, 163, 170, 175.

**SNOW, SNOW COUNTRY, AND COLD**

- The Snow Country is an actual place in Japan known as a rustic recreational area.
- In the book the Snow Country suggests an “other world” separated from the “dirty” world of Tokyo. But it is not that other world in a pure way. Some of the taintedness of normal life (suggested by Shimamura and his desires) is found in the Snow Country.
- White is the color of purity in Japan, and thus snow suggests purity. What color would a world free of the taints of normal life be? White. Kawabata was rather obsessed with purity and cleanliness, in part because it suggested the dimension beyond this concrete world.
- The word cold is repeated frequently in the novel. It is associated with snow and thus purity. Also, cold is disorienting and makes us feel vulnerable, not in control as we normally feel. At times cold pores from outside in the Snow Country through windows into the human world of Shimamura and Komako.
- Images of cold can be found throughout the book, such as on pages 3, 4, 11, 12, 16, 39, 44, 45, 57, 76, and 155.

**MOUNTAIN**

- Mountains are massive, physical, and concrete, but they are also symbols of the Snow Country, and thus suggest the dimension beyond.
- They are cold and filled with snow.
- They also are (relatively) unchanging and timeless.
At the same time, in the mirror episode they flow. At least from a train, they are seen as a long line of ridges flowing past. “He wondered whether the flowing landscape was not perhaps symbolic of the passage of time” (14).
So paradoxically, mountains suggest both this concrete world with flowing time and the timeless dimension beyond.

**Milky Way (“River of Heaven”)**
- A symbol of timeless dimension beyond, vast, with lights but essentially dark (167-8).
- It is a another paradoxical image
  - While they are unmoving, the “River of Heaven” image suggests movement – again a paradoxical image.
  - While it is white/black and suggests purity, it also retains sensuality: it is “voluptuous” and almost sexually ravages Shimamura.
  - While unimaginably distant, it also pulls Shimamura up and flows into him.

**Train**
- A train is mechanical, noisy, running on straight tracks: it is very human.
- But it also functions to connect the two worlds (Tokyo & Snow Country)
- It is associated with window/mirror and thus is a place for connection to the dimension beyond.
- It could be seen as an earthly parallel to Heaven’s River in the night sky.

**Movement**
- River of Heaven: movement but still.
- Train: moves, but inside it it seems to be still while the mountains flow.
- There are various types of movement that suggest being out of control: float, draw up, flow into and through.
- Upward movement suggests both out of control and connecting with the dimension beyond (float up, flame leap, being drawn up)

**Experience of the Dimension Beyond**
- Experiencing it feels like being “suspended in a void.” (54)
- The experience involves a “piercing” sense of beauty that is both linked with sexual beauty and transcends normal notions of beauty.
- There is sadness, yearning for what is beyond, and a kind of tranquility.

**Yūgen**
- The novel embodies medieval Japanese aesthetics, including the love for the withered and austere. The great medieval poet Shinkei made “ice” and “withered and sere” the highest type of aesthetic realization.
- The novel evokes the sense of yūgen. “The brightness of the snow was more intense, it seemed to be burning icily. Against it, the woman’s hair became a clearer black, touched with a purple sheen” (48). “The solid, integral shape of the mountain, taking up the whole of the evening landscape there at the end of the plain, was set off in a deep purple against the pale light of the sky. The moon was no longer an afternoon white, but, faintly colored, it had not yet taken on the clear coldness of the winter night” (85-86).