THE THREE MAIN CHARACTERS OF SNOW COUNTRY:
KOMAKO, YOKO, AND SHIMAMURA

Selected Secondary Sources

Komako
“Shimamura’s attraction to Komako is scarcely indistinguishable from his attraction to the Yukiguni. The predominance of red and white imagery in the novel, as Donald Keene points out, allows one’s imagination freedom, whereas bright colors define things much more clearly.”

“There is almost an ecological bond between the Yukiguni and Komako. She may be viewed as representing the warmth of human communities in the villages buried beneath the snow in winter. . . . Komako is, in fact, not named until about one-third of the way through the novel, until which time she is referred to as simply ‘the woman of the snow country.’”

(page 155 of Snow Country): “The real and the fantasied are so closely woven that we realize with a start that Komako’s appearance is only in Shimamura’s consciousness. ‘The time had come to leave’ is remarkably convincing as the reader is awakened from the reverie he has been allowed to share. In the syntactically looser Japanese version, the tenor and vehicle are even more subtly fused with the effect of maximally blending the human movement into the occasions of Nature.”
--Miyoshi, Accomplices of Silence, 112

“The Komako in the second half is noticeably different. . . . Her body, once translucent like a silkworm, is now changed into something entirely different. . . . Along with this increasing physical realness, Komako begins to emerge more clearly as an individual person aware of human contracts and morals. . . . As her attachment to him increases she beings to lose her function of a mirror and to grow in stature as a woman. . . . Shimamura’s previous vacillation was between Tokyo reality and snow-country unreality, but now that Komako begins to take on reality as a woman, he must have a new pole of unreality and finds it in Yoko. Now his to-and-fro movement is contained within the snow country, becoming shorter and more rapid.”
--Tsuruta, “Flow Dynamics,” 256-257

“Thomas E. Swann . . . suggests that Komako is more of a ‘lens’ than a mirror. Like the window-glass of the train, Komako not only reflects things inside the snow country but through her translucent body also allows Shimamura a glimpse of a fairy-like maiden who does not belong to this world. Komako is the merger-point of the two worlds. The fusion is possible since the essential feature of a mirror or a lens, unlike a lamp, lies in its self-denial. Komako might be described as a ‘translucent mirror.’”
--Tsuruta, “Flow Dynamics,” 253, n. 5

“As the mirror is a device for looking at a purer reality that one cannot touch, so Komako is a bridge to the pure woman Shimamura is only allowed a glimpse of.”
--Tsuruta, “Flow Dynamics,” 255

“The more solid Komako becomes, the more emptiness she brings out in Shimamura.”
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“As the Milky Way repeats its see-saw motion of coming down to engulf Shimamura and then scooping him up into itself, something significant happens. The last sentence of the novel reads, ‘and the Milky Way flowed down inside him with a roar.’ What is striking in the sentence is that in inversion of distance, perspective, and size has taken place: now Shimamura is larger than the Milky Way. He has become the Milky Way. Whereas the horizontal movement begins with a very slow tempo and on a large scale, and ends with a faster rhythm on a smaller scale, the vertical movement begins with a sure, unhurried tempo and on a somewhat small scale, then terminates with a greatly accelerated speed but with a scope that encompasses heaven and earth. The effect of these two movements on the reader is to draw him into an extended pattern of a slow and easy tempo at first, and then, when their scales suddenly change and their
tempos quicken, the reader’s grip on temporal and spatial perspectives is broken. In other words, these movements are designed to break down our normal, firmly structure image of reality. They condition our reality reflexes so that we may accept a world where Shimamura is free to vacillate between heaven and earth and where he can absorb the Milky Way, which itself has already absorbed Komako and Yoko.”
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“The instant at which intense and complete union of the three characters takes place comes when the vertical-horizontal movements reach a sudden climax in the twitch in Yoko’s leg. Komako’s scream and Yoko’s spasm produce in Shimamura an unusual pair of simultaneous ‘motions’: ‘The scream stabbed him through. At the spasm in Yoko’s leg a chill passed down his spine to his very feet. His heart was pounding in an undefinable anguish.’ Only after this union does “Shimamura become ready for a union of a much greater dimension, union with the Milky Way. It is a kind of union made possible only when Shimamura demands the purest of experiences, through mirror, not through raw reality.”
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“I think that Snow Country is about a thoroughly differentiated man taking a trip back to a state of non-differentiation. It recounts the process of undoing his alienation. This explains why Shimamura is reluctant to accept human commitments and conflicts, and also why he persists in dissolving both man and nature to fuse them more easily. In this respect it is probably more than coincidental that there are frequent references to Yoko’s motherly quality and that the reader is made conscious of the tunnel at the very outset of the novel. Note, too, that during his visit to the land of chijimi Shimamura discovers that the locals call the snow tunnel between both sides of a street, tainai kuguri, literally, ‘womb passage.’ The process of returning to the womb is often a death process in the Western humanist’s terminology. It is a stroke of irony that only in this kind of ‘death’ process is Komako allowed to radiate a life-force and a beauty seldom paralleled in modern Japanese literature.”
--Tsuruta, “Flow Dynamics,” 265

“Komako [is portrayed] as a virgin mother. . . Komako’s virgin love has one more outlet: she has a romantic longing for actors, artists, and men of letters who live beyond the mountains.”
--Ueda, “The Virgin, the Wife, and the Nun,” 76

Window scene. “The woman in that evening mirror is of course Yoko, and so the implication is that Komako and Yoko have merged into one in Shimamura’s mind.”
--Ueda, “The Virgin, the Wife, and the Nun,” 77

“Komako has been marvelously successful in retaining her virgin beauty before she meets Shimamura. The success is due to her innate love of cleanliness and her will power to keep herself clean.”
--Ueda, “The Virgin, the Wife, and the Nun,” 79

“That love of cleanliness and will power of Komako’s markedly weaken on the night of 22 May. . . . Still, those qualities within her show resistance: they make her arms protect her breasts, they induce her to bite savagely at her arm . . . when she finds herself unable to refuse Shimamura’s advances. Yet in the end she surrenders to her womanhood. . . . From that night on, she is no longer a virgin to Shimamura, and the nature of her beauty begins to change as well.”
--Ueda, “The Virgin, the Wife, and the Nun,” 79-80

“The change makes Komako beautiful in a new way. The beauty she emanates is no longer a virgin’s, but something akin to a bride’s beauty during the honeymoon. Or, more exactly, she is less than a bride; she is a young geisha in love with a client, and so her position is more precarious. She wants to be a bride, but knows she should not; the dilemma creates an ambivalence within her. . . . Komako, having an insoluble
dilemma, is living her life at the full at this time; she is ‘alive in all her vital intensity’ (86), as Shimamura observes. That is essentially the nature of Komako’s beauty during his second visit to the snow country.”
--Ueda, “The Virgin, the Wife, and the Nun,” 80

“She seems to become more completely a bride with the passage of time, losing her will power to resist the temptation. . . . [G]radually she loses a maiden’s shyness.”
--Ueda, “The Virgin, the Wife, and the Nun,” 80-81

“She takes Shimamura to her lodging and show him her room (53). This last act of hers is clearly suggestive of her metamorphosis: she has not come out of the unrealistic morning mirror and placed herself in everyday reality, with a dresser, a chest, a sewing box and all.”
--Ueda, “The Virgin, the Wife, and the Nun,” 81

“He thinks he has found beauty in the white bush-clovers flowering on the side of a distant hill, but they turn out to be kaya grass when he sees them close by. In contrast to the flowers of the bush-clover, which are small, delicate and silver-white, kaya grass is so strong that it can be used to thatch a roof (92).” . . . [Komako] “has changed from delicate bush-clover to strong kaya grass.”
--Ueda, “The Virgin, the Wife, and the Nun,” 82

Komako “has moved her residence to a more earthy place, too. Whereas previously she lived in a room that seemed unrealistically hanging in the void, she now lives on the second floor of a confectionary. . . . [Komako] cannot follow her inner urge to live cleanly, because she lives amid kind people who are unclean.”
--Ueda, “The Virgin, the Wife, and the Nun,” 82

“The longer Shimamura stays in the hot-spring town, the more wifely Komako becomes.”
--Ueda, “The Virgin, the Wife, and the Nun,” 82

“Komako’s downward slide reaches its lowest point in the celebrated scene of Snow Country where she is angered by Shimamura’s words, ‘You’re a good woman.’ He has said the words in reference to the warmth of her personality, but she misunderstands them and thinks they refer to her female physique. ‘You’re a good woman’ is, indeed, the kind of remark made to a prostitute by her client in the morning after. . . . [Komako] has made herself a prostitute, and Shimamura her customer. . . . Komako has changed from virgin to a bride, from a bride to a wife, and from a wife to a prostitute. Her fall is complete.”
--Ueda, “The Virgin, the Wife, and the Nun,” 83

[Fire scene] “If she were a wife or a prostitute, she would just watch Yoko lying on the ground, as Shimamura and other villagers do. What she actually does is to ‘break away’ from Shimamura, run toward the fire, and hold the unconscious girl at her breast. Komako has entered the final stage of her metamorphosis.”
--Ueda, “The Virgin, the Wife, and the Nun,” 85

“The last phase of Komako’s transformation begins long before the fire. It starts, in fact, immediately after that dramatic incident in which she realizes she has become a prostitute. . . . After a while she comes back, says that she has reconsidered, and asks if he wants to take a bath with her. When he accepts the invitation she leads him to the bathing room, where she becomes very gay and winsome. Next morning Shimamura and Komako awake to a voice reciting a Noh play (149). Outside, the first snow of the winter has fallen. The distant mountains, which had been darkening day by day, have now come ‘brightly back to life with the snow’ (150). The cedar trees ‘point sharply toward heaven’ from the white ground. Ass these facts suggest the nature of Komako’s final metamorphosis.”
--Ueda, “The Virgin, the Wife, and the Nun,” 85

“She is here turning into a different woman, because she has become aware of her sinfulness and begins to repent.”
--Ueda, “The Virgin, the Wife, and the Nun,” 85
“It was natural that the recitation of a Noh play was heard the following morning, because Noh is basically a religious drama which cleanses man from his sins. Komako became the protagonist of a Noh play, so to speak. The snow that feel is a symbol of purification; and the tall cedars, that of aspiration for an ascent to heaven. Some time later Shimamura hears the sound of wind in the pine trees as he listens to a boiling tea-kettle, and he is shocked when he sees Komako’s feet far beyond that sound. The incident is suggestive of a Noh play, *The Sound of Wind in the Pine Trees*. Komako is like a heroine of that play who has fallen low because of love and who is fervently wishing to be saved.”

--Ueda, “The Virgin, the Wife, and the Nun,” 85-86

Procession of nuns in the Chijimi-weavers’ villages. “Komako will become a nun, in the metaphorical sense of the word. It is a logical answer, for she has turned into the protagonist of a Noh play. Many heroines of Noh become nuns when they grow older and are awakened to their sinfulness.”

--Ueda, “The Virgin, the Wife, and the Nun,” 86

Fire scene: “Yoko is an embodiment of virginity which Komako has lost – or, which she has sacrificed for Yukio’s sake and for Shimamura’s sake. Yoko, as such, is a painful reminder for Komako of what she has lost. Komako is a nun who holds, and will keep holding, that painful reminder in her arms.”

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“. . . what redeems Komako is neither a Judeo-Christian nor a Buddhist nor a Shinto scheme of salvation, but a more primitive scheme that was the origin of all these religions. It may be viewed as a religion of primitive, wild nature which is symbolized in the image of the Milky Way near the end of *Snow Country*. . . . The nuns Shimamura saw were living in the mountains of the snow country. Komako, too, runs toward the mountains, leaving Shimamura behind, when the fire breaks out; and on those mountains the Milky Way is falling. Shimamura feels ‘a terrible voluptuousness’ in the Milky Way, as if it were coming down to ‘wrap the night earth in its naked embrace’ (165). If the Milky Way is coming to be the Woman for Shimamura, that transformation must have been initiated by Komako who is running toward it. Komako is merging with primitive nature, dedicating her womanhood to it. After the dedication, she will be a woman without womanhood: a nun.”

--Ueda, “The Virgin, the Wife, and the Nun,” 87

“a novel embodying a sustained search for the purest, noblest, supremely beautiful way of life, a way of life that forever remains untouched by the foulness of mankind. The search is difficult. . . . The only hope lies with a virgin, a person who instinctively defies foulness, a person who is destroyed at the touch of foulness. But could there be an eternal virgin? . . . It is by becoming a nun. . . . She will lead a life of penance, with full knowledge of both the nobility and depravity of humanity. She will merge with wild, primeval nature, humbly dedicating herself to it.”

--Ueda, “The Virgin, the Wife, and the Nun,” 87-88

“Although [Komako’s] way of life differs greatly from Yoko’s, she is a variation of Yoko in the sense that her love is always directed toward some object that is unattainable.”

--Ueda, *Modern Japanese Writers*, 179

“In all these instances, Kawabata used the character of a young woman to embody his concept of ideal love, a longing pure and without stain, impossible to consummate.”

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“Kawabata liked to place a young woman in the center of his novel not only because she symbolized his ideal, but because she was capable of living intensely in her selfless efforts to fulfill that ideal.”

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“As the Milky Way repeats its see-saw motion of coming down to engulf Shimamura and then scooping him up into itself, something significant happens. The last sentence of the novel reads, ‘and the Milky Way flowed down inside him with a roar.’ What is striking in the sentence is that in inversion of distance, perspective, and size has taken place: now Shimamura is larger than the Milky Way. He has become the Milky Way. Whereas the horizontal movement begins with a very slow tempo and on a large scale, and ends with a faster rhythm on a smaller scale, the vertical movement begins with a sure, unhurried tempo and on a somewhat small scale, then terminates with a greatly accelerated speed but with a scope that encompasses heaven and earth. The effect of these two movements on the reader is to draw him into an extended pattern of a slow and easy tempo at first, and then, when their scales suddenly change and their tempos quicken, the reader’s grip on temporal and spatial perspectives is broken. In other words, these movements are designed to break down our normal, firmly structure image of reality. They condition our reality reflexes so that we may accept a world where Shimamura is free to vacillate between heaven and earth and where he can absorb the Milky Way, which itself has already absorbed Komako and Yoko.”
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“Like Shimamura, all men are passengers on a train, a train called Time, and are prone to be bored as they watch the monotonous landscape endlessly extending into the distance. They often lose sight of their destination, of a meaningful purpose in life. On rare occasions, however, external nature reveals something that glows, the glow pervading a person whose soul is pure and transparent. Supreme beauty emerges in a tangible form at that moment. As the glow is gone the next moment, it requires an extraordinarily sensitive person to glimpse that beauty. Shimamura, who notices the beauty of Yoko’s face mirrored in the window, is precisely such a person. Whenever there is a moment of supreme beauty, he catches sight of it and reports to the reader.”
--Ueda, “The Virgin, the Wife, and the Nun,” 74

“Yet it is not that her face or figure is beautiful. She emanates beauty through her eyes and voice, and that is all. . . . Apart from those two attributes her physical description is almost totally lacking, as if to suggest
that for Shimamura her body does not exist. Her beauty is unreal, like an image reflected on the window pane. . . . Shimamura’s fingers are unable to touch Yoko’s body. She is an untouchable existence. . . .”
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“[S]he is a virgin. . . . If there is a life of pure beauty untainted by the world’s foulness, a virgin would come closest to it. From a man’s point of view, she is an embodiment of unreal beauty that exists in reality.”
--Ueda, “The Virgin, the Wife, and the Nun,” 74

“Sexual passion is completely lacking in the relationship between [Yoko and Yukio]. Yoko is a virgin, and as such her love is free of lust.”
--Ueda, “The Virgin, the Wife, and the Nun,” 75

“a virgin’s love is always unrewarded. No matter how much love she may give out, she does not and cannot expect it to be returned. . . . In all cases a virgin’s love goes unrequited; to borrow Shimamura’s phrase, it is a ‘complete waste of effort.’ But the beauty of love increases in proportion to the degree love is wasted.”
--Ueda, “The Virgin, the Wife, and the Nun,” 75

Yoko “has to be always eager to give out her love, because the object of her love is always distant and is moving even farther away from her. Her eyes are piercingly beautiful because of her eagerness to give her love; her voice is so beautiful that ‘it struck one as sad’, because she expects nothing in return for her love. Yoko’s beauty if that of love given in vain. Because of this, her beauty always has a tinge of futility and sadness.”
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Window scene. “The woman in that evening mirror is of course Yoko, and so the implication is that Komako and Yoko have merged into one in Shimamura’s mind.”
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“her virginity is completely out of danger. . . . Having no flesh means having no physiological recourse to live a vigorous life; accordingly, as long Yoko remains a virgin and refuses to be touched, she is doomed. Her future holds only three alternatives: madness, death, or rape.”
--Ueda, “The Virgin, the Wife, and the Nun,” 83

“Snow Country leaves Yoko’s destiny ambiguous. She may die, or she may live on as an insane person. The latter is more likely in view of what Komako says at the end of the novel (175). In any case, Yoko the pure virgin is dead. She has been as transparent as a silkworm, but now that the cocoon warehouse is burnt, she is burnt, too. Yoko is a silkworm that does not want to turn into an ugly moth. She does not want to become the second Komako. Here only choice, then, is death, physical or mental.”
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“Because of Yukio’s illness, there is an unbridgeable distance between him and Yoko. The harder she tries to bridge the distance through her love, the more intense her life becomes. She is a woman living a ‘pure life.’ That is why Kawabata makes her eyes shine so beautifully.”
--Ueda, Modern Japanese Writers, 178

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**Shimamura**

“Shimamura awakens to the realization that the most intense emotion he is capable of experiencing fails to ignite even a spark of humanity in him.”
--Araki, “Kawabata and His Snow Country.” 344

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“The underlying principle of this analysis of landscape [Appleton’s prospect-refuge landscape] is that human beings seek to ‘see without being seen,’ and search for habitats based on this primeval survival mechanism. Thus, we seek to observe the ‘threats’ of nature from a place of safety. This is exactly what Shimamura does in Snow Country, observing the Yukiguni at first from the cocoon of the train carriage and then from the safety of the Yuzawa inn. The train is also his means of escape from the hostile and unfamiliar environment. The ‘prospect’ offered by the mountains is essentially symbolic, accentuating the potential for extended vision if one were to climb to their summits.”

“Shimamura, like anyone else, is continually compelled from the past to the present, and from here into the future, but he lives the present as though it were a somehow lasting extended stasis, the experience of beauty occasionally shocking the moving darkness into a radiant stillness.”
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“Kawabata . . . often blends the character and the geography of his story together, until Shimamura finds it difficult to distinguish in himself any distinction between his attraction to Komako and his attraction to the ‘snow country.’”
--Rimer, Modern Japanese Fiction and Its Traditions. 168

“Shimamura cannot separate his vision of her from his vision of nature.”
--Rimer, Modern Japanese Fiction and Its Traditions. 169

“The vision of the distraught Komako rushing to embrace the body of Yoko, burned in the fire, has all the power, and all the intensity, of a powerful nō drama. And, as in the nō, such a final moment of intensity serves to show the innermost layer of emotion that makes up the character of the personage portrayed, a summation of the dramatic purposes of the whole. And, like the nō, Kawabata’s structure serves to emphasize the deepest roots of personality in the central character rather than to increase tensions between characters in the narrative: the tension remains internal.”
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