Alan G. Chalk Guides to Japanese Films

Lesson 10: Snow Country (Yukiguni)

Reading: *Snow Country*, 1935-47 novel, Kawabata

Film: *Snow Country*, 1957, Toyoda

Suggested grades: mature 10th and 11th grade students, otherwise 12th and college.

Themes:
The themes of loneliness, the poignancy of impossible love, and the tragic waste of beauty and love; the traditional theme of "mono no aware," the awareness of beauty and sadness in the transience of nature, life, and human relationships; also, the evocative poetic-visual perception and style of Kawabata's novel growing out of the tradition of haiku.

The story:
Shimamura returns to the snow country, drawn to its seasonal beauties and traditional life style, and drawn particularly to Komako, a young apprentice geisha he had met on a previous trip. He is a wealthy, middle-aged man trying to escape from the hollow existence of his marriage and his Tokyo life style. Earlier in the spring, having gone to the mountains to recover a sense of "honesty with himself," he had been attracted to the innocent, youthful beauty and purity of the young geisha.

What follows is a love affair, yet it is a love that can never be fulfilled. Shimamura tends to observe and participate in life from a detached, aesthetic distance which allows him to separate himself from the realities of human existence. He is, in the end, incapable of love. Komako, on the other hand, lives in the center of love and life, vulnerable to her emotions and the forces of life which must inevitably bring her disappointment and tragedy. She is the heart of this story, as she, before Shimamura's and our eyes, matures from a young girl to a passionate woman aware of and resigned to the passing of the seasons of nature and her life.

Teaching:
The story synopsis might lead one to think that the novel or film will not appeal to young people, yet to my own surprise it has been well received by a wide range of students and particularly by young girls who seem to identify with Komako. However, very important to student involvement in the work is careful preparation for appreciation and understanding of Kawabata's fictional world.

The approach suggested is through images selected from the novel and reinforced by the film. "The Mirror of an Evening Scene," as Kawabata entitled the original story which became the opening of his novel, focuses on the multi-layered image which Shimamura observes in the train window next to him. With a finger he associates with the immediate memory of the young woman he is going to see, he draws a line across the misted-over glass. He is startled by the reflection of a beautiful eye and face of a young girl floating across the snow country landscape. It is a mirror image of the young

woman across the aisle from him. She is attending a young man who is very ill. The image establishes the triangular relationship in the novel of Shimamura and the two women as figures passing across the snows and shadows of the winter mountains. Further, Kawabata seems to anticipate the cinematic imaging of his prose. He writes:

> In the depths of the mirror the evening landscape moved by, the mirror and the reflected figures like motion 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.

Because of Kawabata's style, it is important to establish in the beginning the need for reading the text carefully with close attention to images, metaphors, and symbols. Throughout the study of the novel, selected film clips can reinforce and extend the students' understanding of the text.

Suggested film clips correlated with key passages in the text:

> 1. The opening to Shimamura's arrival at the inn (the train mirror image). Note, the film uses two mirror images including Komako's at the station.
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> 2. The flashback dealing with Shimamura's first visit with Komako. This requires some background on the geisha in traditional Japanese culture, including the difference between a geisha as artist and a hot-spring geisha who is more a party companion. Liza Dalby's anthropological study, *Geisha* (University of California Press, 1983) is very good, but there are other useful sources.
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> 3. Komako's playing of the samisen for Shimamura and the discussion of the irony of the "wasted effort." Note, the film's long shot of Komako's playing reveals her emotion when she realizes that Shimamura is thinking of departing.
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> 4. In part two, the passage on the Chijimi linen and what it reveals about the snow country and its people.
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> 5. The ending, the fire, and the milky way (the Tanabata Legend) and the fate of the two lovers. Note in the text Yoko apparently dies, while in the film she survives scarred and becomes a life-long burden for Komako.

Following the study of the novel, students can work with the film as a separate artistic interpretation. The 134-minute film requires three to four classes for showing and another class for discussion. A teacher's guide *Japanese Literature On Film* (New York Japan Society) includes a useful analysis of the film by Professor Keiko McDonald.

Although Kawabata's *Snow Country* is a relatively short novel, it is a work with many levels of meaning. His Nobel Prize speech, "Japan, The Beautiful, and Myself," introduces the students to Kawabata's drawing from traditional poetry to express his themes of a Buddhistic emptiness which is "not to be taken as the nihilism of the West, but rather, seen as "the spiritual foundation of the Orient." Speaking of Dogen, a Buddhist poet-priest of the 13th century, Kawabata suggests how his own writings might be viewed: "even as [Dogen] sang of the beauty of the seasons he was deeply immersed in Zen."

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