

Tragic Aesthetics and Linguistic Features of Kawabata Yasunari's "Snow (ゆきぐに)"

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Abstract: Kawabata Yasunari's masterpiece *Snow (ゆきぐに)* is a unique blend of Japanese classical and Western modern literature, embodying rich tragic aesthetics. The work also possesses strong artistic characteristics with concise and refined language descriptions. Extensive narratives of psychology and dialogues reflect the author's emphasis on emotional rendering and expression. Additionally, the intentional portrayal of characters' emotions and destinies through changing seasons, coupled with the skillful use of the stream of consciousness technique from Western modernist literature, adds a layer of surreal beauty to the entire book.

Keywords: Kawabata Yasunari (かわばた やすなり), *Snow (ゆきぐに)*, Tragic Aesthetics, Linguistic Features

1. Introduction

Kawabata Yasunari is a significant figure in Japanese and even Asian literary history [1]. His work *Snow* inherits the essence of "The Tale of Genji," continuing the tradition of tragic aesthetics, namely the concept of "mono no aware" or the beauty of transience. Beyond this, he incorporates creative techniques from Western literary genres, such as the stream of consciousness, forming his unique language style.

2. Tragic Aesthetics

The entire narrative of *Snow (ゆきぐに)* revolves around the themes of tragedy and beauty, telling the captivating love story of Shimamura, a wandering aesthete researching dance, who visits the hot spring inn *Snow (ゆきぐに)* three times. This work continues the tragic aesthetic view of Japanese classical culture, concluding the protagonist's fate and ending with a tragic beauty [2].

2.1. Depicting Tragedy through Melancholy

2.1.1. Tragic Lives of Female Protagonists

Snow creates a sense of tragic beauty by portraying the miserable destinies of the main characters. The female protagonist, Tsukiko, is a beautiful girl from humble origins who learns to play the three-stringed instrument from her master since childhood. Despite her efforts to maintain a rich inner world

and pursue personal happiness through writing diaries, poverty forces her into a desperate situation. Sold to Tokyo as a hostess at the age of sixteen, although later redeemed, her life takes a downward turn. The master who taught Tsukiko the three-stringed instrument passes away, and the master's only son, Yukio, falls seriously ill. To earn money for Yukio's treatment, Tsukiko reluctantly becomes a geisha. However, Shimamura believes that Tsukiko's life is futile. Her efforts to study and write daily diaries are meaningless as no one cares about her inner world. Practicing the three-stringed instrument in a remote mountain village is pointless, as worldly people are only indulging in physical pleasures and won't appreciate her skills or show respect. Treating a terminally ill man is also meaningless, partly because his disease is already hopeless, and partly because Tsukiko's meager income cannot adequately alleviate her material difficulties. Falling in love with someone who will never love her back is also futile, as she is a married man from a wealthy family, while Tsukiko is just a lower-class woman, and they can never have a future together.

The life of the second female character, Yuki, also carries a strong tragic undertone. While the text provides limited details about her family situation, her desire for Shimamura to take her away from Snow to Tokyo to work as a maid suggests a situation similar to Tsukiko's. Both born into ordinary circumstances, Yuki's greater tragedy lies in the loss of love and the death of her lover, Yukio. As a dreamlike character, she is beautiful and pure, dedicated to love, embodying the ideal woman in Shimamura's eyes. With Yukio's death, Yuki, with a strange sense of fate, ends her life in flames.

2.1.2. Tragic Love of Protagonists

The female protagonist, Tsukiko, is swept away by the torrent of fate and unfortunate enough to become a geisha selling her body. She desires to maintain a pure inner sanctuary in a society filled with carnal desires and seeks personal happiness and love. Consequently, upon encountering Shimamura, who shows some respect and sympathy, she inevitably becomes entangled in the whirlpool of love. However, the love between Tsukiko and Shimamura is destined to be tragic. This is not only because Shimamura is fickle and difficult to be faithful, but also due to the inequality in their relationship. Tsukiko is merely a beautiful geisha from humble origins, and despite her youthful beauty being an advantage, time is fleeting, and youth will fade. Love expressed solely through the body is not stable enough. Despite Tsukiko's talent in playing the three-stringed instrument, it doesn't elevate her status significantly in a society dominated by carnal desires. She remains a woman of the lower social stratum. Shimamura, on the other hand, leads a leisurely life, supported by inherited wealth. His comfortable material foundation makes him indifferent to everything, and his inherent pessimism convinces him that his relationship with Tsukiko is ephemeral. The inequality in their status and differences in their views on love lead to the tragic conclusion of their romance.

The love tragedy of Yuki and Yukio is a different kind of tragedy. Unlike the subjective factors influencing Tsukiko and Shimamura's love tragedy, Yuki and Yukio's love tragedy is dictated by reality. Yukio's death brings a tragic end to their love.

The love tragedy between Yuki and Shimamura is one that ends before it even begins. Shimamura is deeply attracted to Yuki's beauty and purity, but Yuki is devoted to Yukio. After Yukio's death, Yuki also perishes in a sudden fire, bringing an abrupt end to their love story.

2.1.3. Tragic Endings

In *Snow*, each of the four main characters meets a tragic end. Yukio dies of illness, Yuki falls to her death in a sudden fire, Tsukiko goes insane due to Yuki's death and the erasure of everything by the fire, and Shimamura, with the emptiness of love, returns to a life even more void than before. This, too, can be considered a form of tragedy.

2.2. Creating Melancholy through Chronology

Snow subtly portrays the emotional changes between Shimamura and Tsukiko through the changing seasons and the succession of time [3]. Tsukiko and Shimamura meet in the vibrant early spring, where the lush, green and soft yellow landscapes create a nurturing environment for love, allowing the buds of affection between the two to sprout. Shimamura's second visit to Snow occurs in winter, driven by longing. However, he does not believe their love will bear fruit. Unwilling to see Tsukiko trapped in this doomed love and reluctant to face a futile outcome, he leaves again in winter. The third encounter takes place in the following autumn. Unable to resist the longing for Tsukiko, Shimamura returns to Snow. Their love, like the autumn leaves ablaze with red hues, radiates brilliance for a while. However, as the red fades, it inevitably moves towards the harsh winter. In winter, their feelings completely dissolve into nothingness, Tsukiko goes insane, and Shimamura departs. With the passage of seasons, plants experience growth and demise, mirroring the love of the male and female protagonists, which undergoes both blossoming and perishing.

3. Language Features

3.1. Conciseness and Precision

The language of *Snow* is concise, straightforward, and close to life. With just over 80,000 words, the work encapsulates intricate character relationships and life content. The writing is concise and precise, predominantly using plain descriptions and character dialogues to present character images. The author demonstrates ingenuity in artistic cutting and arrangement, not only vividly depicting Tsukiko's character and psyche but also employing various techniques in background setting, chapter transitions, the author's narration and discourse, and the juxtaposition of details. In handling certain pivotal characters, the author cleverly utilizes side descriptions, achieving a "less is more" effect that adds the final touch to the portrayal. One such character is Yukio, a supporting role in the novel, who plays a crucial role in depicting Tsukiko and Yuki's images, revealing character relationships, and advancing the storyline [4]. Typically, authors leave ample space for such characters, but Kawabata Yasunari uses a concise narrative to delineate this character through side descriptions.

3.2. Characterization through Color

The narrative extensively uses the colors "black, white, and red," not only in describing the scenery – the pure white snow symbolizing the winter landscape of Snow and the fiery red of autumn leaves – but also in portraying the physical appearance of characters. For example, Tsukiko's naturally rosy cheeks, shiny black hair resembling black iron ore, and long, dense eyelashes on her fair skin create a vivid and intense color palette, enhancing Tsukiko's charm [5].

What is particularly noteworthy is the author's use of symbolic colors to portray character personalities. Tsukiko embodies both red and white, with red as her base color representing her passionate nature. Upon first meeting Shimamura, she enthusiastically recounts her past, later actively seeking him out multiple times, not concealing her feelings for him. This creates an image of a woman burning with passion on paper. Tsukiko also possesses the purity and sincerity represented by the color white. Despite falling into the world of geishas to earn money for her teacher's son's medical expenses, she continues to write diaries and practice the three-stringed instrument even in dire circumstances, maintaining admirable purity and sincerity.

Yuki is associated with the color white, not only due to her pure appearance and clean background, similar to other women born into poverty who become geishas early in life, but also because she is a warm-hearted person. The story begins with her sincerely greeting the train conductor and asking him to take care of her brother. After the train starts moving, she attentively cares for a sick young man.

Most importantly, she is associated with the color white because of her devout love for Yukio, making Yuki represent the beauty and sanctity in Shimamura's eyes. Her death introduces a touch of black into the pure white. However, it is precisely because of her death that her life and soul become even purer and cleaner.

3.3. Skillful Use of Stream of Consciousness Technique

The successful integration of the stream of consciousness technique with the precise style of traditional Japanese literature is a distinctive feature of the artistic technique in *Snow*. The short story begins with a simple statement: "Through the long tunnel at the county border, it was Snow. A vast expanse of white under the night sky. The train stopped in front of the signal." These three sentences succinctly convey the time, place, and environment of the story. Then, Shimamura accidentally sees a woman's profile on the train, and using the scenery behind her as a springboard, the story unfolds, narrating the encounters Shimamura has with two women – Yuki and Tsukiko – during his travels through three countries. Through associations with these women, memories of the past and imaginations of the future are evoked. For example, when Tsukiko is dressing up in front of the mirror in the morning, Shimamura sees her "rosy cheeks shimmering in the mirror's white reflection" in the snowy landscape, portraying her as exceptionally pure and beautiful. In Shimamura's memories, there is also a pure and beautiful girl, the "girl reflected in the twilight on the train's glass" – Yuki, triggering his memories of the encounter with Yuki the previous night.

The inner worlds of Tsukiko and Yuki are mostly presented through Shimamura's perspective, using his stream of consciousness to showcase different scenes. The story's development is propelled by Shimamura's stream of consciousness, unbounded by time and space, oscillating between dreams and reality. For instance, when Shimamura feels that Tsukiko's love for him is futile and their relationship cannot continue, he decides to leave Snow. However, the sudden addition of "a snowy fire scene" brings him back from reality to a dream, adding a fresh dimension to the stream of consciousness.

4. Conclusion

Kawabata Yasunari's *Snow* embodies a rich aesthetic of tragedy, with the tragedies of characters' destinies, love, and the conclusion all expressing sorrow and his perception of life's nihilism. The concise yet poignant words directly impact the reader's soul, and the flow of colors and thoughts allows the reader to sketch the true beauty of Snow from Shimamura's conscious stream perspective, particularly focusing on the two female protagonists, Tsukiko and Yuki. One of the linguistic features of Kawabata Yasunari's novels is their strong sensibility and lyrical effects. The second feature is the emphasis on color coordination and contrast. The third feature is the extensive use of metaphors, repetitions, and other rhetorical devices, further enriching the characterization. These features contribute to the rich aesthetic value of his works.

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