

Snow Country Study Guide

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Plot Summary

The story opens with a man named Shimamura on a train bound for a resort town in the snow country of Japan. Shimamura is taken by the girl's voice, which he says rings out clearly. The woman is accompanied by an ill gentleman. The man's name is Yukio and he is the son of a music teacher in the village where Shimamura is bound. The woman's name, he will later learn, is Yoko.

Shimamura is headed to a hot spring resort town where he hopes to see a geisha he met on a previous trip. Her name is Komako and she is not yet a licensed geisha when he first meets her. He is entranced with her cleanliness but decides he would rather simply remain friends with her, looking ahead to the possibility of future visits to the town with his family. However, he is not interested in another geisha presented to him for his sexual needs and eventually becomes involved with Komako.

Their relationship is complicated and filled with emotional upheaval on the part of Komako. Shimamura feels she is becoming too deeply involved with him but seems unable to stop it, returning a third time to be with her. Komako is often drunk, tells Shimamura to leave, then to stay, begs him to be with her, declines to lie with him, agrees to bathe with him and later rushes off home. The tumultuous relationship seems somewhat unusual as the traditional role of the geisha is to attend a man's needs without emotional entanglements. Shimamura seems to put up with the moodiness and occasional anger as a matter of course.

Komako lives with a music teacher, the mother of the man Yukio who was traveling on the train with Shimamura. The woman accompanying Yukio, Yoko, remains to nurse him until his death, then goes to work at the inn where Shimamura lodges. Komako and Yoko do not like each other though the exact nature of their relationship is never explained. Shimamura hears from a masseuse that Yukio and Komako were engaged before his illness and that she took on the duties of the geisha to help pay doctor bills. Komako denies this but Shimamura seems skeptical. He says that it seems possible that Yoko is Yukio's new lover and that jealousy has prompted the dislike between the two women.

Yukio dies as does his mother and Yoko and Komako are no longer living in the same house when Shimamura returns for a third visit. Yoko tells Shimamura that she wants to return with him to Tokyo but is later killed in a fire. Komako says she believes Yoko will go insane but does not explain why she has come to that conclusion. When there is a major warehouse fire, Komako and Shimamura rush to the scene where they find that Yoko is a victim. Komako rushes to the woman's side, telling others to stay away because "the girl is insane."



Part One, Pages 1 - 28

Part One, Pages 1 - 28 Summary

The story opens with a man named Shimamura on a train bound for a resort town in the snow country of Japan. Shimamura is taken by a girl's voice, which he says rings out clearly. The woman, who he will later learn is named Yoko, is accompanied by an ill gentleman. The man's name is Yukio and he is the son of a music teacher in the village where Shimamura is bound. Shimamura does not know all these things as they are traveling but notes the way the girl attends the man's needs. When his scarf slips from his face, she hurriedly replaces it and covers him again when his coat leaves his legs uncovered. Shimamura wonders about their relationship and comes to the conclusion that they are husband and wife. He feigns interest in the scenery outside the train window but really watches the reflection of Yoko.

Shimamura is returning to the resort town to see Komako, a geisha he met on a previous trip. He cannot call up a clear memory of her but the forefinger of his left hand "seems to be pulling him back to her from afar."

Shimamura learns about the snow country, that the temperature is below zero when he steps from the train, they expect at least seven or eight feet of snow and that it could accumulate to twelve feet or more.

When he meets again with Komako, Shimamura says he feels the need to apologize but fears it will make him appear even less serious than he truly is. Despite "what had passed between them" during his earlier visit, he does not write her while he was away.

There follows a flashback in which Shimamura recalls his first meeting with Komako. He says he often "loses honesty with himself" and that his trips to the mountain have become a way to regain it. It is on one of these trips during the spring that he comes down from seven days in the mountain range known as the Border Range to stay at the small resort town. There he asks for a geisha but is told there is a celebration going on and that there is more than enough work for all the town's geisha, therefore none are available. However, the dancing and music teacher in the town has a young girl living with her and that girl sometimes agrees to serve. The maid who offers up this information indicates to Shimamura that the girl is "not an amateur." When Komako arrives, Shimamura's first impression is of cleanliness. They begin talking about the mountains and Komako tells a little of her background. She had been tied to a wealthy patron until her debts were paid, and that patron had set her up with the music teacher, but the patron had died. She tells little of what has happened since that time. Shimamura has been in the mountain for a week and says he enjoys the friendship.

The following day he asks Komako to call a geisha for him. She seems angry but he tells her he is "too healthy" after his days in the mountain. He says he wants to remain friends with her and having her select a geisha for him seems appropriate. He says she



can choose someone young and good-looking for him, and that when he wants someone to talk to he will call on her. He says he behaves well because he enjoys her company and he is asking her to choose a geisha for him so she can select someone she likes. He says otherwise, she might refuse to see him again. Personally, he fears an emotional entanglement but also foresees that he might bring his family to this resort town at a later date. He feels Komako would make a good companion for his wife, offering dancing lessons as a diversion to keep her from being bored.

Shimamura begins to analyze his feelings about this situation and his thoughts turn to the reflection of Yoko's face in the train window. He says there is a sense of unreality about the entire event. As a student, Shimamura throws himself into studying dance but finds his interest captured by occidental dance. He stops seeing Japanese dances and gathers everything he can find on this new topic. He refers to the research as "free, uncontrolled fantasy" and says it will never be of substantive use to him, but now he is calling on that knowledge to put Komako at ease with him. When the man appears, Komako refuses to recommend a geisha for Shimamura but abruptly changes her attitude to say she does not mind and she will return to see him later.

Part One, Pages 1 - 28 Analysis

Shimamura says it somehow seems rude to watch Yoko and Yukio but finds he can see her in the reflection of the train window without appearing to watch her. He talks at length about the impact of her face superimposed over the mountainous scenery outside. He says there is a beauty there that draws him. His reaction to Yoko is interesting considering he is going to visit a woman himself and he has left a wife behind in Tokyo. When Yoko disembarks at the same station as Shimamura, he is ashamed of his rude staring.

Shimamura later considers that there could have been something symbolic in his vision of the mountains and the girl's face reflected simultaneously in the window. He says it could have indicated the passing of time. Shimamura and Yoko will become better acquainted, though there will not be a sexual connection.

The significance of the forefinger "remembering" Komako is never explained and it is left to the reader to decide the symbolism involved. It seems evident from the beginning that Shimamura is the less serious of the two about the relationship. He does not return to visit Komako the following February as he promises and does not seem particularly sorry that he keeps Komako waiting.

She is nineteen but Shimamura says she looks a year or two older, and says the fact that she has aged quickly puts him at ease with her. He indicates he is not particularly at ease with her as he should have been with a traditional geisha, but does not explain why the fact of her age makes a difference. There is no solid indication that they have sex after their first meeting and the fact that he asks her the following day to call a geisha for him would indicate they have not. However, he says she "seemed in general to know what there was to know about men," which might indicate they had. It is



obvious that Komako is put out by his request. Then Shimamura gets to the heart of the matter, though he does not tell Komako his real reason for not choosing her. He labels her "an amateur," and indicates what he wants from a woman would be better handled "lightly and with no sense of guilt." It seems Shimamura fears an emotional entanglement with Komako already.

Komako eventually says she can see it will be better if she and Shimamura remain friends and accepts the fact that he might someday bring his family to the village. He repeats his request for a geisha and she asks why he would want one in the daytime. Shimamura says it is easier to avoid the "dregs" of complications in the daylight, which angers Komako. She asks if he believes this to be a "cheap hot-spring town" like many others and seems to feel degraded.

There is a general description of the rules of the geisha within society of the time. Komako says the geisha who stays out all night without the permission of the house is on her own, but those who stay out with permission have the full backing of the house. She explains that if there is a child or a disease, the geisha's keeper takes responsibility, as long as the geisha has followed the rules. Shimamura says it might be that easy in this mountain town but that the rules are more rigid in the city. He also points out that the town seems relaxed about the fact that Komako—an unlicensed geisha—is helping out at parties.



Part One, Pages 28 - 38

Part One, Pages 28 - 38 Summary

Shimamura says that one look at the young geisha who is sent to him melts his desire for a woman. He tells her that he has forgotten he had money telegraphed from Tokyo and must go to the post office before closing time. They leave the room together but Shimamura is suddenly enchanted by the sight of the mountain and climbs up some distance, returning by running down at full speed. Upon his return he tells Komako that his strength left him at the sight of the geisha. Shimamura says he let himself believe all geisha were going to be like Komako and says he was not very nice to the girl. Komako dismisses that, saying it is up to the guest to decide how long the geisha is to stay.

That night, Komako comes to Shimamura's room. She is very drunk, having just returned from an evening with some travelers. She suddenly seems to realize where she is, says she should not be there, promises to return later, and leaves. About an hour passes before she calls to him from the hallway, complaining she cannot see. She is very drunk, says she hurts, asks for water and savagely bites her own arm when it seems unable to respond to her command. Shimamura slips a hand inside her kimono but she braces her hands across her breasts, denying him access. She seems to give in to his hands, rants about the people she likes, then begins writhing with a headache and says she must go home. It is raining outside and Shimamura tries to persuade her to stay. She orders him to bed, saying she will just sit on the floor until she feels better, then demands he get up.

She gives in to the ardor next but continues asking if Shimamura had not said they should just be friends. Then she says it is his fault because he was too weak to find his release with the geisha who came to his room. She then says she is certain he is laughing at her though he insists he is not. Her moods continue to swing wildly, at times thoughtful or talkative and other times crying. She then tells him that she has to leave before daylight so no one will see her face but seems reluctant to leave. Shimamura leaves for Tokyo that same afternoon.

Part One, Pages 28 - 38 Analysis

When Komako asks why he was so happy while running down the mountain, he says, "I gave it up." He does not explain himself but a few minutes later asks if "all geisha are like that." He then says his "strength" left him at the sight of her. It is interesting that he asks if all geisha are "like that," which might indicate he is inexperienced with geisha in general or that he is asking specifically about the mountain geisha of the region. Then he tells Komako that "unless she were as good as you," he would have felt cheated. This again indicates that he has already had sex with Komako though he has made other indications that is not the case. Again, it is left to the reader to decide.



Shimamura does not say what it is that prompts him to leave for Tokyo the day after he spends the night with Komako but it seems evident it is because of fear of entanglement with the girl. It is also not clear what he is more afraid of: that she will become attached to him or that he will become attached to her. He never discusses his own feelings for her and the reader is never given access to Komako's feelings either, but Shimamura will later say that he knows Komako is in love with him.



Part One, Pages 38 - 65

Part One, Pages 38 - 65 Summary

Back in the current time, Shimamura tells Komako that he was not laughing at her that day. Komako begins to count and tells him it has been one hundred, ninety-nine days since then. He asks how she can be certain of the date and she says all she would have to do is go back to her diary. She writes down everything, hides nothing and is even sometimes ashamed to read what she has written herself.

Komako seems to be having doubts again about the wisdom of being with Shimamura, throws herself against the window sill in what he calls a "stubborn" stance, says she is leaving, says she is staying, asks him to stay with her and asks that he just allow her to stay at the window a little longer. He says it is cold out and she should close the window. When he is completely cold himself, he says he is going down for a bath and she meekly agrees to go with him.

Later, she says "this makes me sad," and Shimamura says she is always too high strung. This night she does not sleep at all. He wakes as she is tying her sash. She says it is early but she is leaving.

They meet outside the following day and Shimamura asks if he can read Komako's diary. She says she will burn it before she dies. He then asks if there is a sick man at her home and she explains it is Yukio, the son of the music teacher she lives with. He says he saw Yukio and the young woman arrive on the train, and that he saw Komako at the station. She says it is strange he did not mention it earlier and does not offer additional information, including ignoring Shimamura's question about the identity of the woman accompanying Yukio. They go to her room, a loft in a dilapidated house, which is very neat. She then tells him that Yukio had come home to die after being diagnosed with intestinal tuberculosis. He is only twenty-five, and worked on the coast with a watch maker but moved to Tokyo to go to school. It is assumed that the rigors of school were too much and caused the illness. He sees Yoko briefly and says the look haunts him after he leaves the house.

On his way back to his own room, he meets a blind masseuse and asks for a massage. The old woman pulls a watch from her kimono sleeve, feels the face which is missing the cover, and tells him the time is "two thirty-five." Shimamura is impressed with the ability and the woman agrees to return to his room with him. He questions her about her ability to tell time and she says she is never off by more than a moment or two. She offers other details at his prodding and tells him that from his physique she can tell he does not have to work, does not drink and is not too fat nor too thin. They hear the sounds of a geisha playing the samisen. She says Komako is one of the best musicians available and then reveals Komako has taken on the duties of a geisha in order to help pay Yukio's doctor bills because the two were engaged.



Later, Komako reveals some additional facts about herself. She says she considered going to Hamamatsu to be married but she simply had not cared for the man. She worried for a time that she was pregnant. She curls up beside him with his kimono in her fists and apparently falls asleep. Their relationship is about to change.

Part One, Pages 38 - 65 Analysis

As Komako is telling Shimamura about her diary, she also reveals she has carefully cataloged every short story and novel she has read since she was fifteen or sixteen years old. He asks if she has included her criticisms and she says the writing is only basic information about the book, including its characters. He asks for the purpose and she says there is none, which prompts him to say it is a "wasted effort." He himself is involved in several "wasted efforts" but continues to do what he enjoys. He seems somewhat critical of the same tendency in Komako but then decides it is important for her and is much like his study of the occidental ballet. He says the catalog of reading "had the effect of distilling and purifying" her existence. It is again left to the reader to determine the meaning and significance of this discovery.

As Shimamura approaches Komako again, she throws herself against the window in what he calls "a stubborn pose." Shimamura notes that they will "have to go through that again." Though Komako is definitely more difficult to understand and to get along with than is likely expected of a geisha, Shimamura seems willing to endure the troubles. This is actually one of the few times he mentions the lengths to which he goes in order to spend time with Komako.

The evening after their bath together, Komako says she is sad but does not elaborate. It is significant that Shimamura does not ask for clarification but seems to accept that it is their relationship that makes her sad. The following morning, she is up very early and says she is leaving before daylight. Then she asks if he can see her at all without the light. Though he assures her he cannot, she says "it's no good," and that she will be seen. It is important for the reader to remember that the geisha have rules to follow and Komako is correct to be concerned about her reputation if it becomes known she is spending nights with Shimamura.

There follows a scene in which Shimamura is walking down the street and sees several geisha standing outside. He says he knows Komako will be embarrassed by his presence and he walks quickly past the group. Komako blushes but follows him. He says he himself is embarrassed as well because of the geisha standing around waiting to waylay him. He asks if it is always this way and she says she supposes it is in the afternoons. She then says she is embarrassed that he walked on past. He thinks she should be embarrassed to chase after him but she says it does not matter. The entire scene is puzzling without knowledge of the customs and without looking deeply into the emotions and minds of the two characters. It remains the task of the reader to determine those details.



As Shimamura considers the situation—that Komako was engaged to Yukio, has sold herself to pay his doctor bills, that Yukio has a new lover in Yoko and that Komako remains faithful—he says it is a totally wasted effort on Komako's part. He again is jumping to conclusions and seems unwilling to accept this could be important to Komako, even if he does not understand it. As it turns out, Komako denies they were ever engaged, but the exact nature of their relationship will never be revealed fully.



Part One, Pages 65 - 87

Part One, Pages 65 - 87 Summary

When Shimamura awakes the next morning, Komako is awake and the sun is up. She says she did not awake in time to go home before daylight. She declines to accompany him to the bath for fear someone might see her. Shimamura says she is "completely tamed," and has been cleaning his room. It is the first of many such mornings as Komako stops even trying to leave early. On the first day, Shimamura suggests she practice the samisen and she telephones home, requesting the instrument be brought to her. While they wait, Shimamura asks if she was engaged to Yukio. She says it is not true, that there was a time his mother thought it was a good idea, that she felt she owed his mother a great deal and felt she had to do what she could. She says she was sent off to Tokyo to become a geisha and Yukio was the only one who saw her off. Shimamura notes that Komako never mentions Yoko and her role in the situation.

Shimamura hears Yoko's "beautiful voice" calling out to Komako from the hallway. She hands over the instrument, Komako thanks her for bringing it, then Yoko leaves. Komako says she has had no one to teach her to play so she practices from scores. The music teacher she lives with had a stroke and Komako says it only frustrates the old woman to listen without being able to correct her.

On following mornings, Komako sometimes plays with the landlord's daughter for some time before giving her a bath. One morning, Komako and Shimamura watch skiers on a slope. Komako says she enjoys the sport.

The night before Shimamura is to return to Tokyo, Komako insists they go for a walk despite the fact that it is very cold. When they return to Shimamura's room, he suggests a bath but she remains seated on the floor and says she is going home herself, then says she will just sit there throughout the night, then again that she is going home.

The following day, Shimamura overhears Komako and the innkeeper discussing her fee for his stay. She is paid by the hour and asks for no payment for overnight stays. Komako accompanies Shimamura to the station. While there, Yoko runs up and tells Komako that Yukio is dying and is asking for her. Komako refuses to leave, saying she has the obligation to see Shimamura off. Shimamura sends Yoko home, saying he will send Komako in a cab. Shimamura tells Komako that he does not know what there is between the trio—Komako, Yukio and Yoko—but he knows she will regret it for the rest of her life if she does not go to him. She says she does not want to see him die. Shimamura boards the train and it climbs up the Border Range. He wonders if Yukio has already died and then turns his attention to the only two passengers on the train—a man in his fifties and a girl—until the man disembarks.



Part One, Pages 65 - 87 Analysis

When Komako spends the night, it seems possible she does not rise to go home on purpose. Her spending a day with Shimamura would likely put their relationship on a new level and it seems possible that she deliberately stays. When Komako begins playing, Shimamura says he is willing to go wherever her music takes him. He is worried about how far it will take him and feigns bored indifference. This does not bother Komako, who is pleased with her playing and does not need his approval.

It seems Komako considers she is falling in "too deep" with Shimamura and knows there is no chance they will have a long-term relationship. At one point she tells him he has no idea how it is for her then she says he "really must go back tomorrow." Shimamura asks what he can possibly do for her—no matter how long he stays. She seems angry at that statement and tells him he has no reason to say that.

Shimamura says Komako's reaction to the news that Yukio is dying could be heartlessness or passion, and he cannot decide which. Komako's personality again comes to the surface as she says she plans to burn her diary and will never read it nor write in it again. She sees Shimamura off on the train but will later say she will never do that again. On the train, Shimamura sees a man in his fifties and a woman who are sitting together. When the man speaks, the woman leans forward and listens carefully. Then the man disembarks and the woman is left on the train. Shimamura is disturbed by the fact that the two were not together when they appeared to be a couple.



Part Two, Pages 89 - 108

Part Two, Pages 89 - 108 Summary

Part Two is Shimamura's third trip to the resort town to visit with Komako. He begins by saying his wife warns him it is the "egg-laying season" for moths so he should be careful about his clothing. He arrives to find the innkeeper's wife warming long cakes, leftovers from a celebration of a geisha who is at the end of her term. Komako asks why he has come and he says he has come to see her. Her response is that she hates people from Tokyo because they are always lying. She says Yukio died, seeing Shimamura off at the station was difficult and that she will not go with him again. She also notes that he did not come back on February fourteenth as he promised. Komako says the music teacher was ill and she left her to wait for Shimamura's return. The teacher also died.

The February festival is the "bird chasing festival." Children build a snow "palace," sing the "bird chasing song," spend the night in the palace and sing again the next morning. It is a day of ushering in the spring. Komako says it has been a year since Shimamura's last visit and asks if he is the kind who only comes once a year. He does not answer but says he had one of the cakes from Kikuyu's party from the innkeeper's wife and that he saw Kikuyu but did not speak to her. Komako abruptly asks if he knows how she feels. He does not answer but says the stars are different from the stars in Tokyo. The talk goes on in this manner, with Komako asking questions that Shimamura does not answer, including whether he ever worries about other people's problems.

Komako's situation has changed. With the death of the music teacher, she accepts a contract as a geisha with the owner of a candy shop. She lives in the rooms above the shop while the owner and his family live in cramped quarters below. She says that they require that she read by candlelight to save electricity but that she cannot complain of their treatment of her. She says that when one of the younger children cries, the mother takes it outside so Komako will not be disturbed. She says she spends a great deal of time picking up after the children though she is not asked to and they scatter their things again immediately. She again asks Shimamura if he understands how she feels. She says she is sometimes very lonely, is a fool, and that he should return to Tokyo tomorrow. She says it seems all she has accomplished in the past year is to quit smoking. She says she has paid back almost half of her debt on her contract, that she works only as the mood takes her and spends time and money on herself. She says there is not a single geisha at the hot spring town who had to extend her contract to make the payments.

Part Two, Pages 89 - 108 Analysis

Shimamura encounters a "White-Russian woman, a peddler." She is dirty and dressed as a peasant. He asks where she is from and she says only, "Where am I from?" before



leaving. There is no indication of the significance of the encounter. He sees women carrying "kaya" grass—a kind of grass used to thatch roofs.

Komako says her friend and another of the village geisha, Kikumura, has left. The woman had a wealthy patron who built her a restaurant in the town, then Kikumura decided to fall for another man and dropped the patron. However, the patron had the restaurant and with no one to run it, his wife moved in with her children. Kikumura was then ashamed and decided not to remain in the town. Komako tells Shimamura this story and then says Kikumura will easily find work in another town and that troubles like this happen when a woman allows herself to get caught up in romance. She calls Kikumura a "sad case," and seems to be talking about herself as well, saying it is not good that she has become so deeply involved with Shimamura.

Komako says she expects her time as a geisha to go quickly. She says she has already completed almost a year of her four-year contract and has been in the mountains for five years already. She seems to indicate that she is content to allow the time to pass, though she also seems discontented with her situation.

She wonders aloud if she would be able to have children and then tells him she has been "generally faithful" to a man she has known since she was sixteen. She says she does not really like the man but does not have the will power to leave him. It is never made clear whether there actually exists such a man or if it could be something Komako makes up to prompt Shimamura's jealousy.



Part Two, Pages 108 - 139

Part Two, Pages 108 - 139 Summary

Komako spends the night and says Yoko now spends all her time at the cemetery. The next night, Komako slips into Shimamura's room early and says she came in while no one was about. She says she worked harder than anyone else in her family and that she sews. Komako and Shimamura go to the cemetery though Komako does not want to and they encounter Yoko. Komako says she believes Yoko is early and she herself had considered going to the hairdresser. It seems Komako is trying to make small talk, then the train rushes by and Saichiro, Yoko's brother, yells at her from the train. Komako watches Yoko working at the gravesite for a moment then turns, saying she is going to wash her hair. Shimamura asks if Yoko lives alone, which prompts Komako's anger, and she says she hates the way he asks questions he has no business asking. She says Shimamura has no idea how she feels but does not elaborate.

At three the next morning, Komako noisily enters Shimamura's room. He notes she is "dead drunk," she says she is there because she promised to come, then says she has no idea how she made it up the hill to the inn. She asks Shimamura to cut the strings holding her coiffure in place then says she must go home.

One day, Komako says she does not expect to come again that day but later sends Yoko to Shimamura with a note that says only that she is having a "fine noisy time" and is drinking. Yoko leaves quickly before Shimamura has time to talk to her. Komako later stops by his room and asks if Yoko gave him the note. Shimamura says Yoko probably thinks Komako is a "disgrace." Komako says that is the reason she asked Yoko to deliver the note. She then says she is certain Shimamura likes Yoko's eyes before sweeping from the room. She sends Yoko with another note. This time, Shimamura admits to being slightly uncomfortable with Yoko. She says she is planning to go to Tokyo and asks if she could accompany him. Shimamura says she should be careful about her traveling companions and asks what she plans to do there. She says she does not know but that a woman alone can always make a living for herself. She tells Shimamura that she does not like Komako and has not talked to her about her plans. She does, however, urge Shimamura to be good to Komako.

It is here that Shimamura gets a brief look into Yoko's life. She had thought she would like to be a nurse but says that Yukio was the only man she could have nursed. She says that she spends all her time at the cemetery but wants to go to Tokyo, then does not explain how she could leave Yukio's grave behind.

Part Two, Pages 108 - 139 Analysis

Within a few days of his arrival, Komako and Shimamura are involved in a familiar argument. Komako says she has things to do, that she plans to go home and wash her



hair, and indicates that she will not spend her time with Shimamura. Shimamura says she should not go but does not try to keep her. He suggests that they visit the cemetery where Komako's "fiance" is buried which makes her angry. She says she already told him they were not engaged and hates people who seem able to do whatever they please. It is not certain whether Shimamura is deliberately baiting her or if he is actually jealous of what he believes to be their relationship. He says there is no doubt in his mind that she became a geisha to help pay Yukio's doctor bills. Komako says she has never been to the cemetery, that she could not be completely honest with Yukio while he was alive but that she will be now that he is dead.

Later that day, Shimamura learns Yoko is working at the inn. He says he is "strangely reluctant" to call on Komako knowing Yoko is in the building, but does not explain what he means by that. He says only that he feels somehow drawn to Yoko as well. He says Komako comes often on her own without being called. One night, during a party, she slips away several times to visit Shimamura. She says the party is "hard work" as there are some thirty guests and only three geisha.

Shimamura says the days became very similar and there comes a point where he is certain Komako "must have wanted to crawl away and hide at the thought of where it was leading." He does not elaborate but Komako says she is worried about her reputation and tries to sneak in to Shimamura's room without alerting the staff of her presence.



Part Two, Pages 139 - 172

Part Two, Pages 139 - 172 Summary

Later, Shimamura hears Yoko singing while she bathes the innkeeper's daughter. She sings a song about birds in trees and it makes Shimamura wonder if he has seen her in a dream. Shimamura walks Komako home because she is drunk. He recounts some of his conversation with Yoko and Komako says that Yoko is "foolish," and that he does not have to tell her about the conversation. She then asks Shimamura if "you'd like to have her." She then says it is not really what she wants because "if she were to fall in the hands of someone like you she might not go crazy after all." At her house, she invites Shimamura inside. He follows her in, stays for a short time then leaves with Komako saying she will walk him back as far as the inn, but then she follows him inside to his own room.

They drink some and Shimamura says it is not normal for him to become so drunk so quickly. In this case, however, he is soon reeling and he tells Komako that she is "a good girl." She responds that it is wrong of him to tease her and becomes angry about the remark. She tells him she hated him on the first day she saw him and "when a woman has to say these things, she has gone as far as she can." Shimamura says only that "it's all right." He repeats that she is a "good woman" and she asks what he means by that. She accuses him of laughing at her, becomes "scarlet" with anger and says she hates him. Shimamura says he knows he has made a mistake and that she has reason to feel hurt. She leaves but soon returns, says she has "reconsidered," and they go for a bath together. Later she becomes "strangely gay and winsome."

Shimamura spends a day visiting neighboring villages where Chijimi—a type of weaving—was done in generations past. He considers that he has stayed in the mountains so long this time that one might wonder if he has forgotten he has a wife and children. Shimamura says that the thread for Chijimi is spun in the snow, the cloth is woven in the snow and the material is washed and bleached in the snow. It is a lost art but Shimamura says he has standing orders at some shops to have the opportunity to buy any Chijimi that is offered for sale. He says he has any kimonos made of the material sent back to this region to be bleached in the snow each year. It is noted that the women of the region learn to weave as young girls and traditionally turn out their best work before age twenty-four. They spend the long winter months at their craft and create elaborate designs. During his trip to the Chijimi region, he stops in a shop for noodles. While there, he notices a group of nuns and the shop keeper says the women are hurrying about their business to accomplish all the outdoor work necessary before the snows begin. She says they will stay indoors through the winter. Shimamura suggests they should learn the art of Chijimi but the shopkeeper does not reply.

When he returns to the inn, he meets Komako who asks where he has been. Their talk is interrupted by the clanging of a fire alarm and they look to see that a warehouse is on fire. Komako says the building is used for a movie house and that there will be people



inside. They hurry toward the fire, following antiquated fire engines and other villagers. Along the way, they talk about the brilliant appearance of the Milky Way. Once at the warehouse, they discover that the roof of the building is not engulfed but that the interior continues to blaze. They see a woman's body plunge through the flames and know she is dead.

Then they see a woman's body "float up" beside the smoldering fire. Shimamura says the body is "quite horizontal," stiff and appears unreal. Komako screams and he realizes it is Yoko. Yoko's leg spasms slightly and then she is still. Komako rushes to Yoko and pulls her away from the fire. The crowd pushes forward to envelop the two women but Komako urges them to stay back, saying that the "girl is insane." Shimamura tries to move toward the two women but "his head fell back, and the Milky Way flowed down inside him with a roar."

Part Two, Pages 139 - 172 Analysis

As Shimamura sees the poverty of the shopkeeper, he says he also senses a vitality. While Komako has several rooms to herself, the shopkeeper and his family are sprawled into a single room. Komako stomps through the house, making no attempt to go quietly so as not to wake the family.

It seems Shimamura has come to the conclusion that it is time for him to return to Tokyo and spends the day away from Komako touring neighboring villages on purpose. He is interested in the ancient art of Chijimi and uses that as a reason for his day away but Komako says he should have taken her along. He does not comment on that observation.

When the fire begins, Komako tells him to wait back away from the fire because the villagers will not appreciate his intrusion, but Shimamura finds himself going along toward the fire anyway. Komako chides him for seeking the excitement but they stand holding hands as they watch the firefighters work. Komako rushes to Yoko as she is dying, and she tells people to get back because Yoko is insane.

The book ends with a number of unanswered questions. It is left to the reader to determine the exact nature of the relationship between Komako and Yoko, Komako's reason for saying Yoko is insane, and her true feelings toward Shimamura.



Characters

Komako

A geisha in a Japanese resort town and the woman who captures the interest of Shimamura, a wealthy gentleman. Komako is a complicated woman living with a former teacher. Komako has learned the art of being a geisha and gives herself to the trade in order to help pay the doctor bills for her teacher's son, Yukio. Komako says the people of the town believe she and Yukio were engaged but that it is not true. After the death of her teacher, she contracts herself to a shopkeeper's family as his geisha. There are many facets to Komako's personality. She is desperate to keep everything around her tidy and neat and says she spends much of her time picking up after the young children of the family she lives with only to have them scatter their belongings again. When she stays with Shimamura, she cleans his room often and even sometimes folds dirty clothing.

Komako is contracted for four years but has repaid almost half her debt before the end of the first year. She says she could make a lot of money if she were willing to attend more parties and to work harder at her business, but wants time to take care of herself as well. There are few details about Komako's professional life. She tends to drink too much and often rushes into Shimamura's room in the middle of the night when she is drunk.

There is a complicated relationship between Komako and Yoko that is tied to Yukio. It seems likely that Yoko is jealous of Komako's hold over Yukio and that Komako feels either resentment or guilt that she has not been able to provide what Yukio wants of her.

Shimamura

The main male character of the story. Shimamura is a wealthy Japanese man. There is little description of his personal life except that he was born into money and is a man of leisure with no requirement to work. He does, however, find interests to occupy his time. For example, he says he has studied the occidental ballet and plans to write a book on the subject, though he doubts it will have any impact on those interested in dance. He often points out things he believes to be a waste of time. Mountain climbing is one of those though he first met Komako after "coming down" from the mountain.

Shimamura meets Komako in a resort town when he is actually looking for a geisha. From the first meeting, their relationship is complicated. Shimamura considers that he wants to be friends with Komako rather than to take her as a lover but that soon changes. He visits her only three times in two years but on his final visit admits a reluctance to leave. He does not explain that reluctance, except to deny it has anything to do with wanting to stay with Komako.



Yoko

The girl traveling on the train with Shimamura. Shimamura believes the girl to be unmarried, though she is traveling with a man who appears to be ill. Shimamura is taken with the girl's appearance and with her voice. Much later, he will learn there is a level of jealousy between Yoko and the geisha girl he is involved with. It seems that Yoko loves Yukio and pledges never to love another. Before Yoko's death, she asks Shimamura if she can return with him to Tokyo.

Yukio

The sick man from the train. Shimamura discovers he is the twenty-five-year-old son of the music teacher in the town. The young man has intestinal tuberculosis and comes to his mother's home "to die." He was living in Tokyo where he was studying, and it is believed the strain was too much for him.

The Station Master

The man who answers Yoko's questions about her brother, including that he does not believe her brother was prone to drink. He promises to tell him to go home during his first holiday.

The Blind Masseuse

A blind woman Shimamura happens to meet on his way to his room after leaving Komako's room. He is impressed with the woman's ability to tell time by using a watch with no face and questions her about her life. She tells him that her oldest daughter is twelve and that she seldom ventures out when the roads are bad. She also compliments him on his physique, saying he "must not have to work," that he obviously does not drink, and that he is not too fat but not too thin.

Kikuyu

The geisha who is leaving as Shimamura makes one of his trips to the Snow Country. Komako says Kikuyu accepted a restaurant as a gift from one of her wealthy patrons, then fell for another man. However, the second man left without her and Kikuyu was ashamed to remain in the village. Komako says she will miss her friend but uses her as an example of what happens if a geisha loses her head over a man.



Saichiro

Yoko's brother. She asks about him early in the book as the train she is on makes a stop at a train station and the station master tells her that her brother is fine and not prone to drink. Saichiro yells out to Yoko as she is in the cemetery.

The Inn Keeper's Wife

The woman who offers Shimamura a cake upon his final arrival to the hot spring town. Little is known about her except that she has a daughter who enjoys spending time with Komako and that she works at treating her guests well.

The Candy Shop Owner

The man who holds Komako's geisha contract. The man is not wealthy but Komako says she cannot complain about her treatment from the shop owner and his wife. The family sleeps crammed into a small space while providing several rooms for Komako.



Objects/Places

The Snow Country

That part of the main island of Japan that lies west of the central mountain range and the place where this story is set.

The Border Range

The mountains near the hot spring town where Shimamura and Tomako meet.

The Station

The train station where Komako waits with Shimamura as he is leaving the hot spring town after his second visit. She later tells him it is too difficult to see someone off and that she will not do it again.

Obi

The sash worn over the kimono. Women's are usually wider than that worn by men and the obi is considered to be an important fashion accessory.

Geisha

A professional woman who serves the various needs of gentlemen. These needs are often sexual but may extend to include companionship. Geisha were typically licensed for their trade.

Kikumura

A restaurant opened in the resort town by a wealthy patron of the geisha Kikuyu. Kikuyu then decides she will not run the business and the man's wife moves in to run it instead.

Tokyo

Where Shimamura lives.

Camellia Room

The room at the inn where Shimamura is staying while in the snow country.



The Inn

Never identified by name, this is where Shimamura stays while he is visiting the hot spring town. There are typically a number of guests and the inn provides the services of a geisha for the guests.

The Cemetery

Where Yukio and the music teacher are buried. It is where Komako and Shimamura meet up with Yoko who is visiting the graves.



Themes

The Need for Love

Komako is not yet licensed as a geisha when she first meets Shimamura but she apparently performs the duties of a geisha even then. She seems to recognize from the very earliest meetings with Shimamura that she could become more deeply involved with him than would be wise. Despite that, she spends as much time as possible with Shimamura and is sorely disappointed when he fails to return on a specific date as he promised. Before long, Shimamura says he realizes Komako is in love with him though there is nothing to be done about it. For her part, Komako is torn about this love. She sometimes becomes perverse, saying she wants him to leave then begging him to stay. She seems to want to protect herself from further hurt but also wants to hold on to what she has for as long as possible.

Komako is not the only character in this story who seems to desire love. Though there is little indication of the details of their relationship, it seems Yukio has some level of love for Komako. As he is dying, he sends Yoko for Komako. Yoko says Yukio is dying and is calling for Komako. Though Komako refuses to go to him, the fact that he calls for her seems to indicate that he holds at least a deep affection—if not love—for her. At the same time, Yoko seems to have given her heart to Yukio. She hovers over him, tending his needs during the trip back to his mother's home and then stays to nurse him. She even goes so far as to fetch Komako to his side as he is dying. That kind of sacrifice, as well as her statements later that she could not possibly leave Yukio's grave, indicate her own love for him.

Desire

It is desire that prompts the first meeting between Komako and Shimamura. He has been in the mountains for a week and says he needs the release of a woman's presence. When he meets Komako, he decides he would prefer to have her for a friend and asks her to recommend a geisha to care for his needs. He says what he has in mind is simply to have an encounter with no guilt and no entanglements. He goes so far as to tell her that he wants to schedule the encounter during the daytime to avoid the "dregs" that sometimes occur at night. At one point during their conversation, Shimamura says he realizes he is showing off his maleness but he cannot seem to help it. He seems to want to make Komako more aware of his sexual need.

While Shimamura says his desire is non-specific, indicating that any geisha who is young and attractive will do, he soon discovers this is not true. His conversation and time spent with Komako has heightened the desire but it is now aimed solely at her. When the young geisha arrives, he says his desire melts away quickly. He goes so far as to tell the girl that he has to leave on an imaginary errand in order to avoid the sexual encounter. When he again meets with Komako, he admits the scene to her. His desire



eventually finds release in Komako and he is willing to endure her bouts of drunkenness and her tirades in order to continue to fulfill his own desire for her.

Selfishness

Shimamura could be pointed out as the epitome of selfishness in this story. He first encounters Komako during a trip he has taken to the mountains. He describes his reason for the trip as being an opportunity to restore his own honesty and apparently takes off on his own occasionally. When he makes these trips, he leaves his wife and children behind. During his third visit with Komako, he admits he has been away so long that one could wonder if he has forgotten he has a wife and children at home. While there are few details about Shimamura's home life or his family, it seems his needs in this case take precedence over his family's need for his presence. Shimamura's sexual needs are the reason he first meets Komako. When he decides he does not want to complicate things with her, he asks her to call another geisha for him. Despite any feelings that Komako might have on the matter, Shimamura decides he wants to keep Komako available as a companion for his wife if he brings his family to the hot spring resort town for a future trip.

It is not only Shimamura who is selfish. Komako is summoned to the bedside of Yukio as he is dying but refuses to go. She says only that she cannot bear the thought of watching a man die. Shimamura is not certain what to make of her admission but says she should go to him. He says she will regret it if she does not fulfill his dying request, but she apparently does not. She says much later that she has never gone to the cemetery to visit Yukio's grave because she was not been honest with him in life but refuses to lie to him in death. It is important to note there is little information about the backgrounds of these characters. There could be more complex reasons for their actions but, at least on the surface, they appear to be motivated only by personal selfishness.



Style

Point of View

The story is written in third person from Shimamura's point of view. The view is limited to Shimamura's perspective. In addition, only those events that happen to Shimamura in the resort town are revealed. He occasionally mentions his wife and children, but speaks of them in a detached, general sort of way with no details. For example, he mentions that his wife warns to watch for moths on his clothing while he is visiting the mountain resort. Other than an occasional mention of this sort, the only information the reader has is what happens within Shimamura's sight. It is known Komako is attending parties and going about her "business," but there are no details of those escapades. In some ways, this is rather limiting but seems necessary for the effectiveness of the story.

Setting

The story is set in Japan in a resort town of the Snow Country. It is explained early on that the term "snow country" does not refer to a place with an occasional snow, but is a place where there is constant snow creating incredibly harsh conditions. The town is not named but is described in some detail, as are other towns in the area. Shimamura travels to and from the town by train and he describes the train cars in some detail as well. There are many descriptive passages—the snow corridors in neighboring towns, for example. While those descriptions do enhance the story, some readers may find them superficial to some degree. There are more in-depth descriptions of the countryside and Shimamura seems to be more interested in the fauna of the area than the towns themselves.

There are some descriptions of Japanese life that western readers will likely find interesting. For example, Shimamura is to visit Komako during the February "bird-chasing festival." There is an explanation of the event which ushers in the spring. Children build a snow fort, sing songs and spend the night in their "palace." As it happens, Shimamura does not arrive during the festival but the author takes time to explain how the festival works.

Language and Meaning

There are some words, phrases and sayings that may make little sense to the modern day reader but it is important to remember that the writer is Japanese, the story is about a Japanese culture, and the story is first published in 1956. While some of the writing seems somewhat dated, most readers will find it is easy to get past any of those segments. One of the examples of the Japanese sayings happens when Shimamura is talking of the young girl he meets and that he is taken with her features. He describes her mouth as resembling a perfect circle of leeches—that the color is "wholesome" and



that the skin is smooth. In general, westerners would not compare beautiful lips with leeches, making analogies such as this sometimes difficult to fathom.

The story is filled with implications to the point that it may seem there is little substance. The reader who begins *Snow Country* with the idea that it is a superficial book about the life of a geisha and her wealthy lover will be disappointed. There are many events and conversations that hint at deeper emotions than are never mentioned outright and these may be somewhat distracting to some readers. For the person willing to dig through those sections, there is the reward of having delved into the deep emotions of a complicated relationship.

It is important to remember the time, culture and setting of the story. The geisha is an important part of the culture and it is accepted that gentlemen will seek their favors. It is interesting to see, however, that Shimamura's attitude is sometimes in conflict. For example, he says he does not understand how Komako could "sell herself."

Structure

The book is divided into only two parts with no chapter designations at all. Specific sections are set apart by line breaks and this helps break up the material somewhat, but some readers may be distracted by the lack of chapter breaks. The line breaks occur generally between events as one would expect in chapter designations.

The story roughly follows a timeline with occasional flashbacks. There are no designations for those flashbacks and it is easy to confuse the flashbacks with the current events of the story. For example, Shimamura is arriving in the town and then flashes back to the memory of the first time he met Komako. These flashbacks can make the story difficult to follow.



Quotes

"The expression 'snow country,' then, does not mean simply a country where snow falls. It means very specifically the part of the main island that lies west of the central mountain range. It suggests long, gray winters, tunnels under snow, dark houses with rafters black from the smoke of winter fires—and perhaps chilblains, or to the more imaginative, life divorced from time through the long snowbound months," from the Introduction.

"He felt a current pass through him, and yet the coincidence did not seem especially remarkable. Indeed he was surprised at himself for being so little surprised," Part One, p. 14

"Shimamura had come to a point where he knew he was only parading his masculine shamelessness, and yet it seemed likely enough that the woman was familiar with the failing and need not be shocked by it," Part One, p. 21.

"With her skin like white porcelain, coated over a faint pink, and her throat still girlish, not yet filled out, the impression she gave was above all one of cleanliness, not quite one of real beauty," Part One, p. 32.

"But her longing for the city had become an undemanding dream, wrapped in simple resignation and the note of wasted effort was much stronger in it than any suggestion of the exile's lofty dissatisfaction," Part One, p. 43.

"Like a warm night, Komako poured into the empty wretchedness that had assailed Shimamura," Part One, p. 62.

"She was a mountain geisha, not yet twenty, and she could hardly be as good as all that, he told himself," Part One, p. 71 (Shimamura upon hearing Komako play the samisen).

"Though he was a idler who might as well spend his time in the mountains as anywhere, he looked upon mountain climbing as almost a model of wasted effort. For that very reason it pulled at him with the attraction of the unreal," Part Two, p. 112.

"He was conscious of an emptiness that made him see Komako's life as beautiful but wasted, even though he himself was the object of her love; and yet the woman's



existence, her straining to life, came touching him like naked skin. He pitied her, and he pitied himself," Part Two, p. 128.

"That straightforward manner, so replete with direct, immediate feeling, was quite foreign to Shimamura, the idler who had inherited his money," Part Two, p. 130.

"All of Komako came to him, but it seemed that nothing went out from him to her. He heard in his chest, like snow piling up, the sound of Komako, an echo beating against empty walls. And he knew that he could not go on pampering himself forever. He leaned against the brazier, provided against the coming of the snowy season, and thought how unlikely it was that he would come again once he had left," Part Two, p. 155.

"Shimamura too looked up and he felt himself floating into the Milky Way. In radiance it was so near that it seemed to take him up into it," Part Two, p. 165.

"She gazed at the fire, the pulse of the fire beating on her intent, slightly flushed face. Shimamura felt a violent rising in his chest. Komako's hair was coming undone, and her throat was bare and arched. His fingers trembled with the urge to touch it," Part Two, p. 172.

Topics for Discussion

How does Shimamura meet Komako? What is his first reaction? What is her reaction? What changes?

Shimamura asks Komako to recommend a geisha for him. Why? What does she say about the request? What finally happens?

What does Shimamura do for a living? What are his other interests? What does he say about wasted efforts?

What details are revealed about the relationship between Yoko and Yukio? Between these two and Komako? What does Shimamura think is the truth about those relationships?

Who is Kikuyu? What happens to her? How does Komako compare that to her own circumstances?

Why does Yoko come to Komako at the train station requesting that she return home? What is Komako's response? What does Shimamura say?

What are some of the conflicts that occur between Komako and Shimamura? Why do they occur?

What are the social attitudes about the geisha? Why is it that Komako hides the fact that she spends the nights with Shimamura? Do you believe she deliberately oversleeps the first morning she stays for the entire night? What underlies your belief?

What does Shimamura say about his feelings for Yoko? What kind of conflict does that prompt?