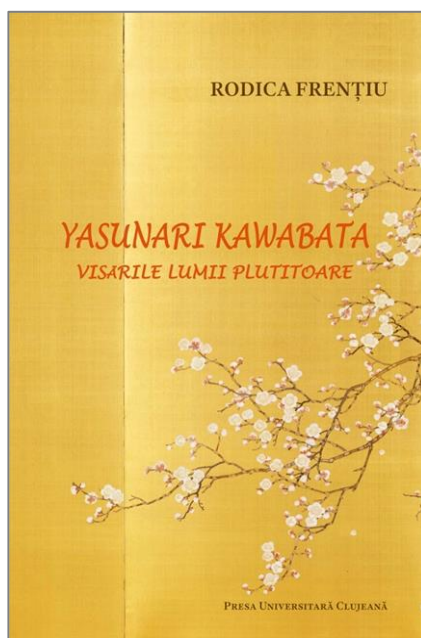


BOOKS

Rodica Frentiu, *Yasunari Kawabata: Dreams of the Floating World*, Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2023, 324 p.

Literary interpretation is a complex art which always involves more than the work being analysed and can never be reduced to a decoding of the author's thoughts. As obviously important as those two aspects are, delving into them exclusively would mean ignoring the author as a person, both in the sense of ignoring the influence of one's life on one's writing style and thematic choices, but also in the sense of ignoring the societal trends in thinking that inevitably affect all people within that context. This explanation was necessary as avoiding that mentality is one of the qualities of Rodica Frentiu's book, *Yasunari Kawabata: Dreams of the Floating World* (2023). The work becomes almost as much about Japanese history, society, culture and the language as about the renowned Japanese author himself, all



in an effort to make it more accessible to a European reader, while keeping it a thorough interpretation that does justice to the alterity of Kawabata by not trying to naturalise and explain his thinking using Western concepts.

A perspective that is aware of the readership is made apparent right from the beginning with Florina Ilis' preface to Frentiu's book-length study. It almost serves as a warning to the reader that Kawabata presents a particularly challenging collection of works considering

both the literary and cultural contexts within which he wrote (p. 8). Ilis does go on to state, however, that "Rodica Frentiu approached the Japanese writer's works without ignoring any of the difficulties that this author poses for foreign readers, but, at the same time, overcoming them with elegance and passion, she brings Kawabata closer to the Romanian reader" (p. 9).



This proves to be true throughout, considering that the volume's arguments are backed up thoroughly with examples and explanations from cultural, linguistic, societal, and literary points of view.

From a structural point of view, the book has six chapters that each undertake a different work from Kawabata. On top of that, there are three more chapters in the form of addenda which shift the perspective from an analysis of the Japanese author, to using him as an example to highlight aspects to be discussed later. Each of the initial six provide a comprehensive examination of their respective work, even repeating explanations from previous chapters where necessary to ensure that each chapter can indeed be read in isolation from the others. However, as the preface mentions, "[a]lthough every chapter can also be read separately, readers that will, in spite of that, read the entire volume, will have, in the end, a unitary overview of Kawabata's literary universe, being able to reconstitute the poetic thread that ties all of these works together" (p. 16). As such, this work is to be seen as a unit in its entirety, each chapter further showcasing the author's range and evolution of thought throughout his career. This view holds true in many different aspects of the book, the most obvious of which being the fact that his works were taken in chronological order, creating a narrative of evolution and shifting methodologies with time, as is the case with most authors. Moreover, as is the nature of any such study, all of an author's works become relevant to understanding their artistic vision, so one chapter might focus on a particular work, while sometimes using another one as a point of comparison in order to properly showcase the overarching theme or the shifting of perspective.

Moving on to a closer look at the chapters themselves, the book begins with a section on *The Dancing Girl from Izu* (1926). This chapter establishes a methodology in analysis that will continue throughout the book, that of beginning with the background information one would expect from such a volume: the ideological background of the period, the literary movement Kawabata is ascribed to, the biographical details that are relevant to the interpretation, and perhaps some of his other works that are relevant. This is followed, however, by something which "makes it unique in the landscape of our Japanology", as Ilis shows (p. 15). There is nothing radically different from other works of this kind, the uniqueness comes in the form of nuance. Namely, that the author's perspective itself seems to shift from that of an outside scholar looking in and coldly analysing the works, looking for known tropes and recognisable literary devices, to someone trying to immerse themselves and the reader into the author's mentality. What follows the more general aspects that serve as introductory explanations to each chapter is an analysis of the main themes, images and concepts that were used, but, while still maintaining the quality of literary analysis, has the undertone of a psychological analysis of the author's mentality which generated the work in the first place. This two-faceted approach that looks at both author and work at the same time creates deeper meaning as it avoids the typical cause-effect relationship to highlight a neo-sensualist exploration of the world, whose findings are completely unique to Kawabata's worldview. Thus, the book shows the ways in which Kawabata transcends the imagery he puts forward with the familiar motif of water, for example, and turns it into a literary device to further his goal of looking

for a “pure” form of beauty within a “floating world” characterised by evanescence (pp. 34-35).

The next chapter focuses on Kawabata’s *Snow Country* (1935-1937) which becomes an opportunity to showcase some of the other particularities representative of Kawabata’s works. First of all, the novel being analysed is similar to this book in that each chapter can be read somewhat independently, but reading it in its entirety is what provides the reader with the grander picture. While it partly has to do with the way the work was published, in multiple parts throughout 13 years (p. 57), the author uses this opportunity to also explain that Kawabata’s novels are much less focused on a plot and its usual way of unfolding, choosing to focus on specific moments and ideas in a series of encounters instead, which gives the impression of “essays in prose” (p. 57). Moreover, beyond looking for the “pure” beauty as a general concept, the author argues that here Kawabata tries to find it in the more specific instance of a conceptualised Japanese beauty. It takes the form of a “Snow Country”, which sits outside of history and outside the perception of Western thinkers who only “project the Occident’s self-consciousness on a...constructed representation” (pp. 57-58).

The third chapter looks at the novel *Thousand Cranes* (1949-1951) and leans very heavily on the author’s knowledge regarding Japanese culture. If the previous novel tried to find beauty in the classical image of Japan, this one shifts to contemporaneity in an analysis of the role of art in the alienation of the modern individual (p. 87). The author uses a combination of elements such as the *mono no aware* concept, representing the sadness

inherent to ephemeral things (p. 86), the analysis of the names in the novel, and explanations regarding the philosophy and traditions which constitute the backbone of different forms of Japanese art, in this case mainly the renowned tea ceremony which takes centre-stage in the novel, but also the Noh theatre to find all of the subtleties in a novel filled with symbolism.

The next step in constructing Kawabata’s literary universe is the novel *The Sound of the Mountain* (1949-1954). The author points out the heavy influence of Western and modern thought on this particular work, emphasizing right from the beginning the psychoanalytical direction that commanded the attention of many Japanese writers (pp. 118-120). Although it can be deduced that Kawabata did not take Western thought in its pristine condition, rather using it to reevaluate Japanese culture (p. 119), this still demands a noticeably different approach to interpretation, seeing as the focus is even less focused on the action and plot, and more on the concepts being utilised to meditate on life and death in the background of Japanese society and its expectations. Thus, the author notices Kawabata’s use of a central character whose limited, yet insightful perspective becomes the focal point of the novel (p. 121). This also becomes the moment when the intratextuality and intertextuality of the book comes into play as the author notices a particular relationship between Kawabata’s works that she calls the “sequenced novel”, referring to the fact that *The Mountain’s Noise* can be read as a continuation of sorts of *The Dancing Girl of Izu* and *Snow Country*, and an ideological prequel to the next novel to be discussed, *The House of the Sleeping Beauties* (1961) (p. 159). Considering she

identifies the main character of *The Mountain's Noise*, like many of Kawabata's characters, with the author himself in some regards, the musings and conceptualisations that come of the situations in the books become more and more intertwined, in the form of a continuous evolution of thought as Kawabata keeps exploring his own subconsciousness (p. 158).

As has just been established, the next novel, *The House of the Sleeping Beauties*, is a continuation of the train of thought started with *The Dancing Girl of Izu* and continued with all of the other works that have already been mentioned in the search for pure beauty in the different aspects perceived throughout Kawabata's life. In this novel, Rodica Frențiu notices another one of these ways to look for beauty, the *Matsugo no me* concept, meaning "the last look" (p. 165). She highlights that Kawabata was very intrigued by the concept and used it in conjunction with the *mono no aware* concept to associate the feelings of sadness which come with the evanescence of everything and the last look back upon life at the end of it to generate the purest form of beauty within the scope of a "floating world" which, again, is characterised by its lack of permanence (pp. 165-167).

The last novel written by Kawabata, and the last this book looks at, is *Beauty and Sadness* (1961-1963). As the author herself admits early on in the chapter, this one will be treated completely differently from the other works she has looked at, choosing to focus on the title itself and its meaning (p. 197). Thus, the chapter begins with a linguistic analysis of the title in an attempt to deduce the author's intent behind its suggestiveness as a culmination of all of the themes and ideas expounded upon in the previous parts of the book (p. 195). Only after extracting as

much meaning from the title as possible, does the volume return to the novel itself in order to draw the final conclusions of a search for beauty and an acceptance of its relation to sadness.

After what could be called the core chapters of the book, there are three chapters in the form of addenda. The first one deals very eloquently with the problem of translation, posing the problem of some of the inadequacies and difficulties regarding term choice in Romanian translations, and the loss of subtler meaning that comes with the great difference between the two languages and literary traditions. This chapter is in a way anticipated throughout the previous chapters with the discussions regarding the translation of the title of *The Sound of the Mountain*, the analysis of the first sentence of *Snow Country* which is repeated here, and many other such instances. The penultimate chapter takes another, completely different direction, choosing to focus on one of the biggest cultural phenomena related to Japan, manga comics. This very insightful chapter provides a history of the term and literary mode, expanding upon its importance and significance in modern times. Lastly, the third chapter comes back to Yasunari Kawabata's work, proposing another possible interpretation to *Snow Country*, one that does not contradict the previous one, however, managing instead to complement it by tying together the previous concepts and the Japanese way to see the passing of time and the alternation of seasons to find even deeper meaning to the symbolism of the novel.

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