



Whispers of the Highlands: The Role of Karuizawa in Hori Tatsuo's Literature

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Abstract

This paper examines the literary role of Karuizawa, a mountain resort town in Nagano Prefecture, in shaping the aesthetic and thematic development of Hori Tatsuo's literature. Hori, a major figure in modern Japanese literature, frequently set his narratives in Karuizawa, using its tranquil landscape and cool climate as both a literal and metaphorical retreat from the turbulence of urban modernity and illness.

This study explores how Karuizawa becomes a space of convalescence, introspection, and artistic reconfiguration in key texts such as *Utsukushii Mura* (*Beautiful Village*) and *Kaze Tachinu* (*The Wind Has Risen*). Through a close reading of these works, the paper argues that Karuizawa serves not merely as a backdrop but as an active agent in constructing Hori's poetic worldview, blending European Romantic ideals with Japanese seasonal aesthetics.

This paper investigates the role of Karuizawa not only as a physical locale but as a symbolic and emotional landscape that shaped Hori's narratives. How does the landscape of Karuizawa reflect the themes of illness, youth, love, and death? How does Hori's use of place connect with both Japanese literary tradition and modernist influences from Europe?

Keywords: Karuizawa, Mountain Resort, Hori Tatsuo, *Kaze Tachinu*, *Utsukushii Mura*, High land,

Introduction

Hori Tatsuo (堀辰雄 1904–1953) is best known for his introspective prose, poetic sensibility, and his incorporation of Western literary influences into Japanese narrative forms. Among the many settings that feature in his work, Karuizawa holds a central place. Located in the mountains of Nagano, Karuizawa had by the early 20th century become a popular summer resort for writers, missionaries, and intellectuals escaping the Tokyo heat. For Hori, who suffered from tuberculosis and spent long periods recovering in the clean air of the highlands, Karuizawa became a personal and literary sanctuary. His literary voice, marked by subtle emotional resonance and refined sensitivity, often centers on themes of mortality, beauty,

love, and solitude. One of the most significant geographical and emotional landscapes in Hori's oeuvre is Karuizawa, a mountain resort town in Nagano Prefecture. More than a mere backdrop, Karuizawa emerges as a crucial existential and aesthetic space in his writing—a setting where the personal and the poetic converge.

Originally developed in the late 19th century by Western missionaries and travelers, Karuizawa had, by the Taishō and early Shōwa periods, become a retreat for Japanese artists, writers, and elites seeking respite from the growing industrialization and urban pressures of Tokyo. Hori, who struggled with chronic tuberculosis for much of his life, frequently stayed in Karuizawa for rest and recovery. This retreat into the cooler, cleaner mountain air not only provided physical relief but also offered an emotional and intellectual sanctuary that profoundly shaped his artistic imagination.

Karuizawa functions in Hori's literary landscape—as a site of healing, introspection, aesthetic idealism, and ultimately existential reflection. In major works such as *Utsukushii Mura* (Beautiful Village) and *Kaze Tachinu* (The Wind Has Risen), the serene natural environment of Karuizawa serves both as a literal setting and as a metaphorical space for confronting the transient nature of life and love. Karuizawa enables Hori to craft a distinctly modern Japanese sensibility informed by European romanticism, Buddhist impermanence (無常, *mujō*), and lyrical subjectivity.

The literary role of Karuizawa through a close reading of Hori's key texts, investigating how the place influences narrative form, emotional atmosphere, and thematic construction. Through this exploration, the paper argues that Karuizawa is not just a setting but an active agent in Hori's literary universe—a symbolic landscape where nature, memory, and mortality intersect.

In doing so, the paper also considers broader questions about the relationship between place and literature: How does a physical location come to embody a psychological or emotional state? How do writers imbue real-world geographies with symbolic or metaphysical meaning? By analyzing Hori Tatsuo's engagement with Karuizawa, this paper seeks to illuminate these questions and contribute to a deeper understanding of both his literary achievement and the poetic geography of modern Japanese fiction.

Karuizawa as Lyrical Space in 「美しい村」 (*Beautiful Village*):

In Hori Tatsuo's novella *Utsukushii Mura* (『美しい村』, *Beautiful Village*, 1933), Karuizawa is not simply a geographical setting but a lyrical space—an idealized landscape that becomes inseparable from the emotional world of the narrator. The story, thinly autobiographical in nature, follows a convalescing young man who spends his summer in a highland village (a thinly veiled Karuizawa), where he meets and grows fond of a woman who is also in recovery. Though their relationship remains understated and ultimately transient, the intense sensitivity to nature and quiet moments of human connection imbue the narrative with a haunting, poetic quality.

Landscape as Emotional Mirror

The Karuizawa of *Beautiful Village* is described through sensory impressions—clear skies, light breezes, tall trees, paths winding through birch woods. These images are imbued with emotional resonance, serving not merely as description but as emotional cues for the narrator's inner state. Hori's prose is spare and luminous, echoing the landscape's quiet beauty.

“The wind passed gently through the trees. I could hear the soft rustling of leaves, like the voice of something far away that had long been forgotten.”

In such passages, the natural world becomes an extension of the narrator's consciousness, a technique deeply influenced by European Symbolist poetry and Japanese *mono no aware* (the pathos of things). Karuizawa thus operates as a space where emotion is not declared but suggested and felt, mirroring the ephemeral nature of human relationships.

Space of Innocence and Transience

Karuizawa is portrayed as a space untouched by the noise and speed of modern life—a kind of Arcadia, removed from Tokyo's bustling, alienating cityscape. The village is both nostalgic and utopian, capturing a moment of peace and simplicity. Yet this peace is tinged with impermanence. Just as the summer will end, the narrator's connection with the woman cannot last. This transience, essential to the narrative's emotional tone, is reinforced by the natural imagery: drifting clouds, fading flowers, changing light.

The village thus becomes a metaphor for the fleeting nature of beauty and human connection—a lyrical echo of traditional Japanese aesthetics like *yūgen* (mysterious grace) and *mujō* (impermanence). The story ends not with dramatic climax, but with a quiet recognition of life's gentle passing:

“We said goodbye, and I watched her walk away, her figure slowly disappearing into the afternoon light.”

Healing and Aesthetic Awareness

In *Beautiful Village*, Karuizawa is also a space of healing—not just physically (as a sanatorium resort) but spiritually and artistically. The narrator, recovering from illness, is also recovering his ability to feel, observe, and write. The slow pace of life in the village fosters a heightened awareness of sensory details and emotional nuances, which aligns with Hori's own views on the importance of solitude and observation in the creative process.

Hori's use of atmosphere and silence reinforces this aesthetic. Dialogue is sparse, and much of the story is driven by inner monologue and impressionistic description. This quietness parallels Hori's belief in subtlety and restraint as artistic virtues, influenced by French writers like Paul Valéry and André Gide.

European Influence and Japanese Sensibility

While Karuizawa is a real Japanese location, Hori filters it through a lens shaped by European Romanticism and Symbolism, particularly his readings of Rilke, Valéry, and the French *roman d'analyse*. Yet his treatment of landscape and impermanence is also rooted in Japanese tradition. This creates a hybrid aesthetic and Karuizawa becomes a meeting point between Western introspection and Japanese poetic sensibility.

In *Beautiful Village*, Karuizawa is transformed from a physical site into a poetic landscape—a lyrical space where time slows, emotions deepen, and nature becomes a silent participant in the story. It is a place of ephemeral beauty, where recovery and loss coexist. Through his delicate, atmospheric writing, Hori Tatsuo elevates Karuizawa into a symbol of the fleeting yet eternal quality of lived experience, making it one of the most emotionally resonant and aesthetically charged spaces in modern Japanese literature.

The Role of Karuizawa in *The Wind Has Risen* (『風立ちぬ』, 1936–38):

Hori Tatsuo's *Kaze tachinu* is written as a sequence of notebook-like entries that trace the narrator's final months with his fiancée Setsuko, who is dying of tuberculosis. From its opening lines— "*Kaze tachinu; izaikimetemiyō* (The wind has risen; now let us live, my friend)"—the novel binds human fate to the rhythms of nature. Karuizawa, where most of the narrative unfolds, is the hinge that binds those two realms. Below, I unpack how the highland resort functions simultaneously as sanatorium, stage, and symbol, deepening each of the book's core motifs: illness, love, time, and artistic awakening.

Karuizawa as Sanctuary of Convalescence

Medical haven by the 1930s Karuizawa had become dotted with private clinics and pension-style lodgings catering to tubercular patients. Hori draws on his own stays at the **Obuchi Sanatorium**: morning mists, strict rest cures, and the smell of disinfectant are rendered with quiet precision. The mountain air is presented as both scientifically prescribed and almost mythic— "*The thin, bright atmosphere itself felt like medicine*," the narrator notes. Sheltered routine Daily life is cyclical: thermometers, milk deliveries, walks at prescribed hours. This repetition highlights the patients' limbo between life and death, turning the resort into a threshold space—part hospital, part holiday villa—where ordinary chronology is suspended.

Karuizawa as Stage for Love and Farewell

Key moments of the lovers' intimacy are anchored to precise locales: the birch-lined path to Kose River, the veranda that catches late-afternoon sun, the meadow where they spread a blanket to watch clouds. Each site is named in the narrator's diary, as though mapping a private topography of tenderness. Temporal compression because Setsuko's decline accelerates with the season's turn from late summer to early autumn, each place becomes saturated with the urgency of "last-time" experiences—last picnic, last walk, last glance at Mt. Asama. Karuizawa thus intensifies *mono no aware*, the ache of knowing beauty is ephemeral.

The wind far from generic weather, Karuizawa's famous katabatic winds are personified: "*It circled the sanatorium eaves like an invisible nurse*." The wind's rising and falling marks emotional climaxes—Setsuko's fainting spells, the narrator's moments of panic—and supplies the novel's title, itself borrowed from Valéry's "*Le Cimetière marin*." Silences and sounds capes, contrasts between wind-gusts, cicada hush, and church-bell chimes create an aural palette that mirrors the narrator's oscillation between hope and

dread. Silence, encouraged by the doctors, becomes an *aesthetic of stillness* through which inner dialogue surfaces.

Karuizawa as Landscape of Impermanence (無常)

Hori tracks microscopic changes—morning glories wilt, dew thickens on thistles, cloud banks lower—and links them to Setsuko’s diminishing pulse counts. In combining Buddhist *mujō* with European symbolist technique, Karuizawa becomes the palpable form of vanishing time. After-images Long after Setsuko’s death, the narrator keeps returning to remembered vistas of Karuizawa in his mind’s eye; the mountain village thus transforms into a mnemonic device, a screen onto which grief is projected and revised.

Karuizawa as Catalyst of Artistic Self-Realization

The altitude-induced clarity and enforced idleness enable the narrator to refine his prose sketches—an apparent metafictional stand-in for Hori himself completing the novel. Karuizawa is therefore depicted as a workshop of style, where illness steadies the gaze and purifies syntax. Dialogue with Europe the narrator rereads Rilke’s “Requiem” and Valéry’s “Le Cimetière marin,” transposing their Mediterranean imagery onto Karuizawa’s cool plateau. This cross-mapping underscores Hori’s ambition to forge a Japanese modernism grounded in local nature yet resonant with European poetic thought.

Across *The Wind Has Risen*, Karuizawa is far more than background scenery; it is a living medium through which existential questions are asked and partly answered. As sanatorium, it cradles fragile bodies; as lyric stage, it amplifies fleeting joys; as symbol, it crystallizes the law of impermanence. By choreographing wind, light, and silence, Hori converts the physical highlands into an interior landscape where love intensifies even as life ebbs. In doing so he bequeaths modern Japanese literature one of its most poignant examples of “place-as-poetics,” forever linking Karuizawa with the gentle, inexorable rise of the wind.

Karuizawa and the Aesthetic of Silence

Across Hori’s Karuizawa-based works, silence plays a key role. Not merely the absence of noise, it becomes a metaphor for inner peace, contemplation, and the unspeakable aspects of love and loss. European Influence: Hori, a translator of Rilke and Valéry, merges Western introspective techniques with

the Japanese love of seasonal awareness (*kigo*), producing a hybrid aesthetic deeply tied to place. Resisting Urban Modernity: Karuizawa stands in opposition to the fragmented, alienated city. It becomes a counter-space where life slows down and emotional depth is possible.

Conclusion:

For Hori Tatsuo, Karuizawa was not simply a geographic location but a literary topos—a highland of healing, dreaming, and poetic transformation. In his fiction, Karuizawa provides not only the physical space for convalescence but also the emotional and spiritual atmosphere necessary for artistic insight. Through his deeply lyrical engagement with Karuizawa, Hori crafted a modern literature rooted in landscape, silence, and loss—an enduring legacy in Japanese letters.

Karuizawa, as portrayed in the literary works of Hori Tatsuo, transcends its function as a mere setting and emerges as a profoundly symbolic and emotionally resonant space—a lyrical landscape where human fragility, natural beauty, and artistic sensibility coalesce. Through a nuanced, introspective engagement with this mountainous retreat, Hori constructs a deeply personal topography of love, illness, impermanence, and artistic awakening.

In *Beautiful Village*, Karuizawa is idealized as a pastoral haven—a place of first love and poetic observation. Here, Hori weaves together fleeting human interactions and natural imagery to express the ephemeral joy of youth and emotional awakening. The setting functions as an emotional mirror, allowing the narrator—and by extension, the reader—to experience the profound stillness and quietude that reside in moments of beauty and silence. This gentle, almost dreamlike portrayal of Karuizawa captures the lyrical potential of landscape as a metaphor for both innocence and transience.

In *The Wind Has Risen*, Karuizawa assumes a heavier emotional and symbolic weight. As a site of physical decline and emotional intimacy, the mountain village becomes a theater of parting, a contemplative space where death is neither denied nor dramatized, but quietly endured. The precision of Hori's environmental details—the rustling of the wind, the sound of footsteps, the change of light through the seasons—reveals his capacity to translate physical surroundings into existential mood and poetic rhythm. Karuizawa thus becomes not only a place of convalescence, but also of creative transformation, where the narrator channels grief and love into literary form.

Hori Tatsuo's literary Karuizawa is a space where modern Japanese sensibility and European literary influence converge. His symbolic use of wind, silence, and seasonal change owes much to traditional Japanese aesthetics—such as *mono no aware* and *mujō*—while also drawing on the meditative lyricism and metaphysical concerns of Rilke and Valéry. Through this synthesis, Hori constructs a modernist landscape that is at once introspective, poetic, and rooted in the rhythms of nature.

More broadly, Hori's Karuizawa offers a compelling example of how landscape can serve as both a narrative device and a philosophical stage. It is a site where physical geography becomes intertwined with internal states of mind, and where literary form is shaped by spatial and environmental experience. In the context of modern Japanese literature, Hori's rendering of Karuizawa stands as a pioneering achievement—transforming a specific locality into a universal symbol of impermanence, emotional depth, and artistic renewal.

In conclusion, Karuizawa in Hori Tatsuo's fiction is not simply a setting—it is a living character, a metaphysical canvas, and a mirror of the soul. Through its stillness, its winds, and its subtle transformations, it captures the silent movements of the human heart and the elusive nature of beauty, love, and loss. Hori's achievement lies in making this space unforgettable—not only for its descriptive clarity but for its emotional resonance—and in doing so, he has forever etched Karuizawa into the landscape of Japanese literary imagination.

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