

## A Critique of Desire: Law, Language, and the Death Drive in Kawabata's *House of the Sleeping Beauties*

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The present study analyzes Kawabata Yasunari's novella, *House of the Sleeping Beauties* (Nemureru bijo), focusing on the role and function of law and its relationship to desire in that work and in literary art in general. To explore this question, the writer has called upon the theoretical work of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901–1981). At first glance, Kawabata's writing seems to be completely disconnected from French theory or theoretical discourse; Kawabata is known for his sensitive depiction of Japanese aesthetics, deploying images of Geisha, traditional dancers, and conventional family scenes, which seem distant from the student turmoil, political background and Tel Quel movement that spurred on Derrida, Kristeva, Barthes, and Lacan. Yet, as demonstrated in the paper, Kawabata and Lacan do share a common respect for Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), and a critical view of language. Additionally, Kawabata wrote a number of avant-garde works including "Crystal Fantasy, Suishō gensō" (1931), the film scenario *A Page of Madness* (1926), *The Lake* (1955), "One Arm" (1965), and *House of the Sleeping Beauties* (1960). These works and others can be read as extended meditations on the unconscious and the nature of the human subject. Among those works, *House of the Sleeping Beauties* is taken up here because it highlights the nature of human desire and its relationship to language, law, the illicit, and the taboo: concepts of key interest to both Japanese literary studies and psychoanalysis.

**Keywords:** Jacques Lacan, postwar Japanese literature, psychoanalysis, *nom de père*, *objet petit a*, "Prayer in the Mother Tongue"

### Introduction

In recent years, interest in Lacanian thought in Japan has been on the increase, with a number of books published describing Lacanian theory, particularly in the fields of psychology, philosophy, and cultural studies.<sup>1</sup> There has also been some discussion of

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1 A representative example is Shingū Kazushige's *Rakan no seishinbunseki*, translated into English as *Being Irrational: Lacan, the Object a and the Golden Mean* (Shingū 2004). Another recent title is Unami Akira's *Rakan-teki shikō* (Unami 2017).

Lacanian theory in literary studies in Japan as well, but for the most part, it has been limited to the realm of Western literature, with only a few articles and books concerning Japanese works.<sup>2</sup> Despite Lacan's heavy reliance on literary texts to establish his theories, there seems to be little movement in Japanese literature studies towards a dialogue between Lacanian thought and Japanese literature at the present.<sup>3</sup> However, Blondelot and Sauret have argued that Japanese culture and Lacanian psychoanalysis are not completely alienated from one another. In their study, they highlight the similarities between the Kyoto school philosopher Nishida Kitarō and Lacan, observing their common rejection of the Cartesian *cogito* and the similarities between Lacan's writing and Zen philosophy.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, I believe that Lacanian theory can also bring to light various concepts in modern Japanese literature as well, and one goal of this article is to expand on that scholarship by considering Kawabata Yasunari's 川端康成 (1899–1971) *House of the Sleeping Beauties*, originally published in Japan as *Nemureru bijo* 眠れる美女 in 1960, in light of a number of Lacanian concepts.<sup>5</sup>

The plot of *House of the Sleeping Beauties* centers on the memories and reminisces of Eguchi, an affluent 67-year-old man who spends five separate nights in a bizarre hotel where a single guest can lie down in the presence of a young, beautiful, naked woman (or girl) who has been drugged into a deep sleep.<sup>6</sup> On each visit, he is welcomed to the inn by a middle-aged woman in a kimono (the Madam), who engages him in small talk before leading him into the room where a young unclothed woman is waiting, drugged and asleep. On each night, after caressing the young woman, Eguchi is visited by dreams and memories of his past loves and sexual experiences. On the climactic final visit, he is presented with two girls, one with a fair complexion, and another who is darker. During the course of the night, the darker of the two dies, her body growing cold as Eguchi sleeps. Upon awaking, Eguchi calls the Madam, who calmly carries off the dead body, coldly ordering Eguchi to go back to sleep, explaining that there is still one more girl left.

Kawabata's novella is obviously highly problematic. Just looking at the summary above, it runs the risk of being interpreted as merely a depraved male sex fantasy. Saegusa Kazuko, in her book *Ren'ai shōsetu no kansei*, briefly discusses *House of the Sleeping Beauties* in a chapter entitled "The Arrogance of Kawabata Yasunari," where she first criticizes the work, writing that the novel shows contempt for and appears to be an insult to women. However, Saegusa stops short of censuring the work as discriminatory, explaining that it has compensatory qualities in its awareness that the transgressions expressed in the book are indeed evil.<sup>7</sup> Nina Cornyetz is more critical of Kawabata's bizarre narrative of a brothel selling girls who've been drugged beyond consciousness. She calls the work an "extremely perverse expansion of the narrative technologies Kawabata brought to his earlier *Sound*

2 Translations of authors who write about Lacanian theory, for example Žižek's *Looking Awry* (Žižek 1991), Jane Gallop's *Reading Lacan* (Gallop 1987) are also available. Also in print are Lacan's *Ecrits* (Lacan 2006) and his various seminars. One example of a Lacanian study of Japanese literature is Katayama Fumiyasu's "Akutagwa Ryūnosuke to Rakan-teki kōzō" (Katayama 2009).

3 One exception to this is Saitō Tamaki's *Bungaku no chōkō* (Saito 2004), which discusses various modern writers including Ogawa Yōko, Ōe Kenzaburō, and Yū Miri.

4 Blondelot and Sauret 2015.

5 Kawabata 1980.

6 Throughout the paper, I use both "girl" and "woman" in reference to the sleeping beauties that appear in the novel. Their ages are unknown, but they appear to be between fifteen and twenty-five years of age.

7 Saegusa 1991, p. 100.

of the Mountain (1949).” She continues, “Eguchi’s desire gathers around the sleeping girls whose various body parts become, one after another, the source-objects of desire.... There is no ‘desirous other’ in this version of Kawabata’s sensate-erotic imaginary.... There is, instead, nothing but material bodies, subjected to his imaginary, and his fantasy flows freely, unfettered by any intrusion of reality.”<sup>8</sup> Cornyetz’s work, however, is not a gender critique, but a comparison of the narrative techniques of Kawabata and the aesthetics of fascism. She astutely describes fascist reinvention of the past and notes the fascist reaction to the modern subject and the move to dissolve that subject into an imagined folk (*minzoku* 民族) community that harkens to the “blood and soil” philosophy of Nazism. She then finds that same fascist aesthetic in Kawabata’s works. In her analysis of *House of the Sleeping Beauties*, Cornyetz references Lacan to help argue a number of points, some of which are consonant with the present article, and some of which are divergent. I will reference Cornyetz work below when appropriate.

It would be easy to write off *House of the Sleeping Beauties* as a depraved male fantasy where women can only be the object and never the subject. Considering that the novel features fantasies of violence and rape against women and concludes with the death of one of the sleeping women, some might claim that it is an oppressive text not worthy of critical attention. However, from another perspective, I believe the work has some redeeming qualities, not in the realm of a gender critique, but in the fact that it draws to the fore an aspect of human reality and truth which we must confront. I shall expose that reality in three parts. First, I will highlight Lacan’s concept of “*objet petit a*” as it appears in the desire of the protagonist which slips from one object to the next. Second, through a Lacanian reading, I would like to reframe *House of the Sleeping Beauties* as a chipping away at the mental exterior and an exposing of the deep-seated nature of desire and its relationship to law. Finally, I will illustrate how the death drive, as Lacan redefines it, plays an important role in the unfolding of the plot. All of these phenomena, which are key psychoanalytical concepts, function within language. Since literature is ultimately an art form completely dependent on and beholden to language, I hope to make clear the relevance of such a reading to this work and, by extrapolation, to suggest its pertinence to the study of Japanese literature in general.

### 1. Kawabata Predicts Lacan

Before I continue on this collision course of Asian literature and European psychoanalysis, I would like to note that the context of Kawabata was not wholly alienated from psychoanalysis, particularly Freudian theory. Kawabata’s debut in the literary scene in the 1920s coincided with a flurry of interest in Freud in Japan, including magazine articles, translations of Freud’s work, and the founding of psychoanalysis practices in Japan. Kawabata himself was not only aware of Freud, but as early as 1930, he wrote that Freudian methodology was “indestructible” and beneficial to both literary writers and critics alike.<sup>9</sup> Six years prior to that, Kawabata introduced Freud’s dream interpretation to students of literature in a magazine article about new writing techniques. I will quote a section from that article.

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8 Cornyetz 2007, pp. 50–51.

9 Kawabata 1982c, p. 426.

Among the various theories of psychology, there is one school, still in its youth, called “psychoanalysis.” The scholars of this school use a method known as “free association.” There is no need to introduce psychoanalysis here, but I want to discuss this method of free association. In this technique the psychologist has his patient, the analysand, sit down on an easy chair or recline on a sofa. In other words, the patient should sit in a way as to relax his muscles and feel comfortable. Then, with just a fragment of a dream, for example the fact that a snake appeared in the dream, the patient should think of all that comes to his mind at the moment of seeing the snake, and this should be done as quickly as possible, without trying to order the thoughts, but just uttering them. The psychoanalyst uses the flow of the free association in order to discover the key to deep insight into the psyche.<sup>10</sup>

This keen interest in Freud may have led Kawabata to foreground the libidinal desires of many of his characters. Among the various writings of Freud that had appeared in Japan as of 1924, it is of great importance that Kawabata was drawn to the analysis of dreams and within that, the analysis of dream images as having some symbolic relationship to the unconscious; concepts expanded by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900).<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Freud’s stress on the verbal expression of patients and the use of free association was not only of great interest to Kawabata, but it is also his closest link to Lacan’s concern with what he calls “the signifying chain.”

Kawabata discussed the nature of the human subject in a number of literary magazine articles he wrote in the 1920s and 1930s. Some of what he wrote is comparable to Lacan’s ideas. One striking position that Kawabata took was a view of language which seems to anticipate Lacan’s reinterpretation of Freud’s castration complex. While Freud saw the concept of castration on the physical level as a perceived threat by the father to force the child to give up his desire to maintain a romantic (or libidinal) relationship with his mother, Lacan argued that castration is a part of the development or *structuralization* of the subject. He sees the concept of castration not as a violent threat, but rather as a symbolic interaction with the “law.” The recognition of the father or some symbol of authority that prevents us from monopolizing the mother’s attention is a crucial moment in recognizing one’s existence as a human subject.<sup>12</sup> Thus Lacan rewrites Freud’s castration complex, recasting castration as a kind of psycho-linguistic phenomenon. The pre-linguistic infant is completely nurtured within the physical relationship of the mother who satisfies all of his needs. Initially, the infant, with no knowledge of the self, cannot distinguish the mother as *other*, imagining her to be just a part of his own body.<sup>13</sup> The eventual recognition of the mother as other is the first experience of the self and the beginning of a life where identity is structured by the other through difference as opposite and negative. As the child is ushered into the world of language, words (signifiers) allow for a better understanding of self, providing the tools to articulate and distinguish various things, concepts, and people. However, language also

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10 Kawabata 1982b, pp. 179–80. This article, entitled “Shinshinsakka no shinkeikō kaisetsu” (An Explanation of New Trends among Up and Coming Writers), originally appeared in the literary magazine *Bungaku jidai* (January 1925), and is translated here by the author.

11 Freud 2001a.

12 Fink 1995, p. 58.

13 Fink 2003, p. 249.

forms the basis for *rules*. More precisely, at its most basic level, language is nothing but rules, admittedly with exceptions and variances in both structure and use. From phonetics and grammar rules, restrictions on word choice, to the very phrases that children are likely to hear (for example, “clean up your room,” or “do your homework”), language is filled with rules. The internalization of rules is one way that we internalize the desire of the Other and in part leads to the self-alienation central to Lacan's account of the human subject.<sup>14</sup> Laws enforced by society invariably appear in the form of language. Lacan describes this in French as “*le nom du père*” or “name of the father,” which is also a play on words being a homophone of “*no* of the father.” This symbolic “no” is castration in the Lacanian sense. For Lacan, the law that takes away our ability to do what we truly want is what castrates us and not the physical father per se.

Kawabata had recognized something close to that concept when he wrote the following in an article in the literary magazine *Bungei jidai* 文藝時代 in 1924.

Language and writing are, among all of the creations of man, the most amazing accomplishments. From that, literature is one of the human marvels. However, on the one hand, thanks to language, the human spirit and human culture has developed infinitely. On the other hand, there is much from *within the spirit and the body which has been castrated* (去勢された) *by language*. Language has given humans individuality, but at the same time, it has robbed us of individuality. (Emphasis added)<sup>15</sup>

Based on the above, Kawabata envisioned language as a double-edged sword that gives us freedom to create, while, at the same time, it limits and controls us. For Lacan, language comes to our minds as a ready-made system of rules that structures our personality and being. Moreover, it complicates our sensually experienced image-based world, what Lacan calls “the imaginary,” with a world where everything is mediated by language, where we are separated from others, and where our experience of nature itself is passed through the cipher of language.<sup>16</sup> We live our existence within the limiting walls of language that determines our identity for us, and replaces our *needs* (nourishment, comfort from the mother) with insatiable *desires* (prestige, social position, money, sexual dominion, political power). After the advent of language, we are alienated from our mothers' bodies, and ultimately from ourselves because the system of signifiers which originates within the Other occupies our minds and provides our identity. Yet this basic fact of existence is below the horizon of consciousness for most people. It is within this context, where the subject is oppressed by law, alienated, and unconsciously desirous of a return to the body of the mother, that this paper approaches Kawabata's *House of the Sleeping Beauties*.

## 2. Eguchi's Motivation

The first aspect of *House of the Sleeping Beauties* that I would like to consider is character motivation. What is it that Eguchi lacks, and hopes to find in the secret inn? He may desire sexual adventure, but if that were the case, why not visit a waking prostitute? It is not that he is

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<sup>14</sup> Aristodemou 2014, p. 65.

<sup>15</sup> Kawabata 1982a, p. 23.

<sup>16</sup> Aristodemou 2014, p. 22.

unable to perform; Eguchi claims to himself that he is still virile, depending on his mood.<sup>17</sup> Cornyetz argues that at the hotel, Eguchi can be free of the female gaze, or any potential look that would “threaten him with its otherness.”<sup>18</sup> In addition to that, I would like to analyze Eguchi’s motive with regard to language and what is beyond that. The secret hotel seems to provide a place where Eguchi can interact with sleeping women on a level beyond language, in a place apparently free of language, where language will not castrate him in body or spirit. Eguchi could, in fact, visit a waking prostitute without engaging in much conversation; certainly, they could avoid conversation altogether. However, when meeting another human being face to face, we are never able to fully circumvent the symbolic; every action in and out of bed will be labeled with meaning. Every act will be *interpreted* by the Other. Therefore, what Eguchi seems to desire is a place where interpretation, or the effect of language, will be kept to a minimum. In other words, the inn gives a sense of freedom or escape from the symbolic itself. Because it offers an experience with the female body that is completely devoid of linguistic interaction, the hotel in *House of the Sleeping Beauties* can be read as a kind of super-topos, a *chora*, in the Kristevian sense, a nostalgic nurturing pre-linguistic place where Eguchi can escape the oppression brought on by the signifier.<sup>19</sup> There, he can interact with women unmediated by symbolic structure. Therefore, we see Eguchi searching for something like a pre-Oedipal nostalgic bliss; a bliss that at the outset of the story the Madam even suggests will visit him.<sup>20</sup>

Examples of that nostalgic experience, including memories of his wife in her younger days, his daughters, and the women he knew in extramarital affairs, can be found throughout the book. But on an unconscious level, fueling his compulsive return visits to the inn is the fact that he is looking for an ultimate nostalgic experience, a return to the world of his infancy, the world of the imaginary, not so much where the mother interacted with him, as where she was a part of him, satisfying his needs. In other words, the text can be read to mean that the sleeping beauties represent enjoyment felt before the law of the father (=language) cut him apart from the continuum of nature, separated him from the mother, and constructed him as a subject. It is a time before alienation, as alienation is the effect of language and the condition of subjectivity. Such a reading is particularly valid in light of the fact that Kawabata’s narrator makes it clear in the morning after his first night at the inn that the sleeping girls are replacements for the lost mother:

He felt for a breast, and held it softly in his hand. There was in the touch a strange flicker of something, as if it were the breast of Eguchi’s own mother before she had him inside her. He withdrew his hand ...<sup>21</sup>

The quotation expresses a pre-Oedipal relationship, not as a linguistic thought, but as a “flicker.” The narrator is forced to employ the simile “as if it were the breast” because for

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17 Kawabata 1993, pp. 17, 39, 75.

18 Cornyetz 2007, pp. 50–51.

19 Kristeva 1984, pp. 26–27. It should be noted that the hotel lures him with an image of a place where language will not castrate him. However, such a place is not truly attainable in the end, as he cannot actually return to a place of no language and remain a subject.

20 Kawabata 1993, p. 18.

21 Kawabata 1993, p. 36.

Eguchi, it is nothing more than an image in his imaginary world. Eguchi is clearly recalling a pre-mirror stage relation with the object of desire—a fantasy of physical return to the mother's body and to a time before alienation and lack. This, I believe, is the motivation of his visits to the inn. However, for Eguchi, who is already structured by language, such a simple return will not be possible. The “no” of the father can no longer be avoided.

### 3. Eguchi's Desire and *Objet petit a*

Eguchi's desire is the central concern of the novella, to the degree that the writer has banished the personalities of the sleeping girls. But how can desire be defined? Unlike a “need,” exemplified by hunger which could be satisfied albeit temporarily with a good meal, “desire” exists on a different plane. Although an animal may “want” or “need,” only a desire can motivate someone to paint a masterpiece, write the *Divine Comedy*, or spend months plotting to win a sweetheart's affection. Desire, as defined by Lacan, is a need that has been translated into the symbolic realm of language.<sup>22</sup> It is the point where visceral feeling (belonging to the realm of the imaginary) and linguistic symbols converge. Significantly, desire only retains its currency when access to it is somehow hindered. This is because enjoyment is derived not from attaining that desire, which will simultaneously cause its destruction, but from the surplus enjoyment of the chase itself. Moreover, according to Lacan, that object of desire itself is actually a lure.<sup>23</sup> The true object of desire lies hidden and unknown behind a curtain, possibly lost forever, and its absence is the key to its attraction. In other words, Eguchi's desire is not the naked women sleeping at the hotel, who he has access to. They are merely signifiers whose own signification has been lost or eclipsed. Eguchi visits the hotel repeatedly, searching for some lost desire whose true nature is unknown, and can only be expressed by a “flicker.”

That flicker which represents a return to the body of the mother is an unconscious desire and troubling to Eguchi. That image returns later in the novel as follows:

And who had been the first woman in his life?

He was less sleepy than dazed.

The thought flashed across his mind: the first woman in his life had been his mother. “Of course, Could it be anyone except mother?” came the unexpected affirmation. “But can I say that Mother was my woman?”

Now at sixty-seven, as he lay between two women, a new truth came from deep inside him.<sup>24</sup>

What had been a “flicker” is now a “flash.” Kawabata's protagonist stumbles across the fact and is shocked and surprised, indicating the alien nature of his own inner mental state. The sleeping girl becomes a metaphor representing what is now gone. Cornyetz discusses *House of the Sleeping Beauties* in a similar vein, writing that the sleeping women are “partial objects” that “stand in place of object a, or source-objects around which desire circulates.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Lacan 2017, pp. 202–203.

<sup>23</sup> Žižek 2018.

<sup>24</sup> Kawabata 1993, p. 94.

<sup>25</sup> Cornyetz 2007, p. 51.

The girls in the house are place holders for a lost object (including but not limited to the mother) that Eguchi wants to approach. Although Lacan's explanation of this aspect of our psyche changed over the years, this is one phase of what he calls *objet petit a*. Nancy Blake explains that the logic of Lacan's *objet petit a* "involves precisely an investment by which an ordinary object becomes a substitute for the unreachable Thing. In Lacan's terms, sublimation is the elevation of an object to the dignity of the Thing (*la chose*)."<sup>26</sup> Eguchi's intrigue and enchantment with the sleeping women (or girls) is only in small part a reaction to their own positive existence; beyond that, the enjoyment he experiences at the house is closely related to the connections he makes between the sleeping girls, his past loves, and ultimately the memory of his mother. In other words, the *objet petit a* stands for what Eguchi has lost, lacks, and desires. Moreover, access requires some real-world object (the girls), but even then, it can never be attained. The continued desire for that "thing" and its never-ending and unbearable lack is what structures the human as a subject. Thus, we can further understand Eguchi's motivation to visit the hotel as connected to the fact that he believes that there, he may access a nostalgic mental chain of signifiers that revolve around the lost object.

#### 4. The Madam's Rules: The Structure of Law in *House of the Sleeping Beauties*

In order to understand how Eguchi's desire functions, we need to take a closer look at the structure of law in *House of the Sleeping Beauties*. The novella opens *in medias res* with Eguchi already in the outer room of the hotel which is attached to the bedroom. The Madam of the inn is explaining the rules:

"Please refrain from doing anything indecent. You mustn't try to put your finger in the mouth of the sleeping girl."<sup>27</sup>

From the first page both the reader and Eguchi are initiated into the law of the inn. Only one page later the Madam explains another important rule. "Please do not try to wake the girl up."<sup>28</sup> The Madam creates the rules, though they are not explained, or justified. She has many rules and continues giving them throughout the novella. For example, four pages into the first chapter she forbids Eguchi from drinking spirits. Eguchi, who usually has a nightcap, is prohibited from doing so at the inn, despite the fact that the secret hotel drugs its sleeping girls to such a degree that they cannot even be shaken awake.

On his second visit to the inn, Eguchi requests to remain until the girl awakes. The Madam categorically rejects this, explaining that meeting with a sleeping girl would be a "crime," as Seidensticker translates it.<sup>29</sup> In the original, Kawabata chose *tsumi* 罪 which can mean both "crime," suggesting legal consequences, and "sin," invoking the idea of a more religious or moral failure. Immediately after that, she explains that no "bad" (悪) exists in the house.<sup>30</sup> Thus, the Madam proffers an inverted law characterized by a symbolic

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26 Blake 2013, p. 46.

27 Kawabata 1993, p. 13. However, I have replaced Seidensticker's readable translation with my own more literal version.

28 Kawabata 1993, p. 14.

29 Kawabata 1993, p. 55.

30 Kawabata 1993, p. 73.



system in which usual human interaction is a crime, and old men sleeping with naked girls dangerously drugged into a coma-like sleep is “good.”<sup>31</sup> She creates a perverse duplication of the law at the hotel by separating the signifier for “sin” from its generally accepted signified and replacing it with its opposite. This strange slippage of the signified under the signifier is an essential aspect of the human psyche as described by Jacques Lacan. Moreover, such perverse inversion of moral laws is not unheard of, especially in times of war, where savage murder, rape, and “ethnic cleansing” are often portrayed as patriotic, moral responsibilities. Kawabata has latched onto this truth in his depiction of the inn.

Next, I would like to focus on the significance of law and its structure in the *House of the Sleeping Beauties*. As stated above, Kawabata chose to place the scene where the Madam lays down the laws of the hotel at the very beginning of the novel, out of order of the *fabula*, and in doing so, he emphasized the significance of “law” within the story. The fact that the hotel is based on an illegal erotic act will of course pique the visiting men’s interest, but that desire is destined to fade as visitors soon become bored with the novelty of the young sleeping women. However, there is something to prevent the boredom: the constant supply of rules. The Madam’s injunction against penetrating the bodies of the sleeping women has a curious effect on Eguchi. After he hears it, he discovers a strong desire to break it. Moreover, on the next page, the Madam touches on another rule which bars virile men from visiting the hotel, saying “I only take guests I know I can trust,” by which she means old, impotent men.<sup>32</sup> These two laws become central to Eguchi’s thoughts throughout the remainder of the story. In other words, the Madam’s mandate enables the continuation of desire. From the second night on, Eguchi’s *jouissance* or enjoyment revolves not around caressing the sleeping nude girls but around his repeated fantasy of breaking the two laws of the inn: the prohibition against being virile and the prohibition against violating the sleeping girls. Moreover, those are actually related to two analogous desires: Eguchi’s desire to overcome the castration of the law itself and the desire to rebel against the primal prohibition concerning that taboo of the mother.

It is worth noting that despite the importance I have attached to the law of the father, Eguchi’s father only appears once in the novel, and in that scene, the father watches helplessly as his wife dies. He is not the *père severe* that we might expect; rather like Eguchi, he has been castrated.<sup>33</sup> Some might be tempted to explain this near absence of the father as an example of a special Japanese version of the Oedipus complex that does not rebel against the patriarchy.<sup>34</sup> However, I do not believe that to be the case. Actually, the oppressive father does appear in the novel, but he does so in the form of the Madam of the inn. Susan J. Napier argues that the Madam exists only as an enabler, to allow these seniors who are “no

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31 The legal scholar Jeanne Lorraine Schroeder explains that in a Hegelian view of the master-slave dialectic, the master is master not because he (or she, as here) deserves to be master. She is the master and the servant (in this case both Eguchi and the sleeping girls) must accept that. Schroeder’s explanation may be helpful in understanding *House of the Sleeping Beauties*. She notes that in legal theory, ethics and law must be independent. We need ethics, she explains, in order to critique law. Therefore, if law were equated with ethics, there could be no kind of review of any legislation (Schroeder 2010, p. 42).

32 Kawabata 1993, p. 14.

33 Kawabata 1993, p. 95.

34 Here I am referring to the “Ajase Complex” which was suggested by Kozawa Heisaku 古澤平作, a practicing psychoanalyst who studied in Vienna and was an acquaintance of Freud in the 1930s. The Ajase complex is described in Buckley 2002, p. 12.

longer men” to recuperate something of their youth.<sup>35</sup> However, I would like to argue that she has another vital function. When she forbids the final sex act by banning the insertion of fingers and other things into the sleeping women, she creates the desire to do just that. In other words, by providing a space in which Eguchi can approach an embodiment of the object of desire while simultaneously forbidding the final sex act, she creates a circuit of unsatisfiable desire, whose result is to perpetuate desire. As in the following, Eguchi does not think about a desire to rape the sleeping women until immediately after he recalls the Madam’s pronouncement of prohibition:

It seemed to him that to force himself on the girl would be the tonic to bring the stirrings of youth. He was growing a little tired of the “house of sleeping beauties.” And even as he wearied of it the number of his visits increased. He felt a sudden urging of the blood: he wanted to use force on her, break the rule of the house, destroy the ugly nostrum ...<sup>36</sup>

Eguchi’s fantasy of prohibited sex here is linked to the unconscious allure connected to transgression and defiance. We know from Japanese works as early as *The Tale of Genji* and *The Tale of Ise* that rule breaking and sexual desire are closely related.<sup>37</sup> It is clear that illicit sex acts with women whose access is prohibited by authority are much more enticing, and Lacan, in his discussion of ethics in *Seminar VII*, argues that *jouissance* can only be obtained at the moment of transgression of the law.<sup>38</sup> As Cornyetz has already noted, *House of the Sleeping Beauties* hinges on a very basic Lacanian concept, which is that “prohibition engenders desire.”<sup>39</sup> Cornyetz argues that Eguchi’s gaze, directed at both beauty and the unsightly, leads back to a “fascistic aestheticization of the real.”<sup>40</sup> In addition to that observation, I believe that Lacan’s concept can help to illuminate Eguchi’s actions. Lacan explains that the law has two functions beyond prohibition: the first is to create the sin itself and the second is to entice the sinner.<sup>41</sup> This is because the conscious image of the law connects and links to the unconscious memory trace of law, as it relates to the first experience of loss symbolized by the concept of “*le nom du père*.” Eguchi’s compulsive craving to visit the house that he has “wearied of” could be related to his unrecognized yearning to abrogate the “law of the father” resulting in a moment of extreme fulfillment or *jouissance*, where he can take what he wants without concern for the law.

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35 Napier 2005, p. 62.

36 Kawabata 1993, p. 89.

37 The hero of *The Tale of Ise* has physical relations with the vestal virgin of the Ise Shrine (episode 71), and an imperial consort (episode 65) (McCullough 1968). Likewise, in *The Tale of Genji* (Shikibu 2001), the protagonist has an affair with Lady Fujitsubo, concubine of the emperor (his father). Moreover, Lady Fujitsubo is cherished by the emperor for her similarity to Genji’s beloved mother who had died. Thus, Genji not only cuckolds his own father, but with a woman who is a replacement for (or simulacrum of) his own mother.

38 Lacan 1992, p. 177.

39 Cornyetz 2007, p. 51.

40 Cornyetz 2007, pp. 52–53.

41 Lacan 1992, pp. 83–84.

### 5. Uncanny Law and the Sign of Virginit

Eguchi's relationship to authority is conspicuous during his second visit, when he makes the decision to take revenge for the insults that the Madam has made towards the old men by raping the young, sleeping woman who is described as appearing like a temptress and a vamp. Eguchi is driven to such a crime not by an uncontrollable sexual desire, but by a desire to lash out against authority.

He was not yet a guest to be trusted. How would it be, by way of revenge for all the derided and insulted old men who came here, if he were to violate the rule of the house? And would that not be a more human way of keeping company with the girl? He did not know how heavily she had been drugged, but he was probably still capable of awakening her with his roughness.<sup>42</sup>

He grabs the girl and shakes her, intending to force himself on her, but at that very moment he finds what the narrator calls, "the clear evidence of her virginit."<sup>43</sup> The writing does not state the exact nature of that evidence which has stopped Eguchi from raping the girl. In Kawabata's original text, the word used is *shirushi* しるし, which is usually translated as "sign."<sup>44</sup> Therefore, it is the sign or *signifier* that stops him. Eguchi is prepared to break both society's and the hotel's law, and it is only this sign that can stop his actions.

The "sign" Eguchi has discovered engraved on the body of the girl is consonant with Lacan's transcendental signifier. That signifier is the phallus, a fundamental concept that Lacan has borrowed from Freud and reworked. The Lacanian concept of the phallus can be compared to unassailable and unquestionable ideological concepts like democracy, human rights, socialism, or God: concepts which in and of themselves are left ambiguously defined but function to order our society and its thought systems. In one of his most important breaks with Freud, Lacan distances the phallus from the actual male organ and removes most of its meaning.<sup>45</sup> He argues that the phallus is able to fix the meaning of all other signifiers. The phallus pins key concepts down, stops the slip of multivalent signifiers, and holds them in place to give meaning to the entire signification system.<sup>46</sup> Lacanian psychoanalysts see the loss of such a signifier as the cause of mental breakdown and schizophrenia. Moreover, the phallus functions as a special signifier that binds together Lacan's triad of the imaginary, the real and the symbolic. It also can provide meaning within the cultural milieu of competing systems of signification. In this scene of the *House of the Sleeping Beauties*, the phallus is the girl's virginal sex organ (belonging to the imaginary), which carries some special meaning for Eguchi (belonging to his symbolic universe) that castrates him, thereby controlling his actions (belonging to the real). The sign of the virginal sex organ controls Eguchi's symbolic world and, at least momentarily, restrains his desire, preventing him from breaking the rules of the house.

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42 Kawabata 1993, p. 39.

43 Kawabata 1993, p. 42.

44 Kawabata 1980, p. 165.

45 Bowie 1991, pp. 124–26.

46 Grigg 2008, p. 31.

## 6. Death Drive and the Murder of the Other in *House of the Sleeping Beauties*

The final point in this paper relates to the uncanny, murderous side of Eguchi. In the Freudian understanding of human society, the pleasure principal could be characterized as basically good. It represents our drive to receive more pleasure, and it includes actions like love making, procreation, eating, and expanding our social circle. In other words, it exists in order for the subject to survive. It occupies the place of desire that we believe will lead to a healthy and fulfilling life. This extends beyond the bare necessities of existence and keeps us moving forward in society. The pleasure principle ensures that we continue searching for that *thing* (though we are not sure what it is), and in doing so, we have survived and prospered throughout history. Marc de Kesel, in his analysis of Lacan's seminar in *Eros and Ethics: Reading Jacques Lacan's Seminar VII*, calls this aspect of Freud's pleasure principle the "ground zero of the good."<sup>47</sup> However, just about the same time that Kawabata wrote *House of the Sleeping Beauties*, Lacan diverged to some degree from Freud's thinking on the pleasure principle. Lacan argues instead that we desire good things on the conscious level, but on the unconscious level, that same ethical desire is aimed at a radical evil. The ultimate satisfaction of our desire brings us evil and self-destruction, not happiness.<sup>48</sup> For Lacan, what is intended to bring us pleasure in one realm (for example, the imaginary) may bring destruction in another (for example, the symbolic). Moreover, Marc de Kesel explains that it is not toward one's actual physical death that the death drive propels us. It is the death of a symbolic self, constructed within the symbolic order, which simultaneously constrains and constitutes one's ego and identity. According to Lacan, the self-destructive desire appears to be fulfilled in a moment of transgression of the law where even the subject itself is lost or dissolved: in other words, a moment of pure *jouissance*.<sup>49</sup> Yet such a moment is really never possible, as we shall see below, since it would result in a disintegration of the subject.

The death drive appears conspicuously in *House of the Sleeping Beauties*. Between Eguchi's fourth and his final visit, an elderly associate of his has died at the inn. Despite knowledge of the danger, or possibly because of that knowledge, Eguchi is again drawn there. On his previous visit Eguchi and the Madam jokingly talked about dying in the hotel. The Madam proposed that he take one of the girls with him, to avoid dying alone.<sup>50</sup> This banter belies two secret death wishes, and the inhumane suggestion fatefully comes true on the final night. Throughout the novella, Eguchi's desire to kill the sleeping women appears in a number of fantasies about beating, strangulating, raping, and stabbing them.<sup>51</sup> Eguchi's conscious motive for murder is clear: retribution against the powers that be, the Madam and her insistence that Eguchi be impotent. However, there is one and only one actual instance where Eguchi is able to transgress her law. On the second night the Madam of the inn had explained the following:

"I've put on an electric blanket, a double one, with two switches. ..."

"You can turn your side off if you like, but I must ask that you leave the girl's side on."

47 De Kesel 2010, p. 124.

48 De Kesel 2010, pp. 124–25.

49 De Kesel 2010, p. 126.

50 Kawabata 1993, p. 73.

51 Examples can be found on the following pages: pp. 40, 76, 78, 89.

“It’s American. But please don’t be difficult and turn off the girl’s side. You understand, I’m sure, that she won’t wake up, no matter how cold she gets.”<sup>52</sup>

As colder days approached, the electric blanket was essential to protect the lives of the anesthetized young women, and it is that side of this blanket that Eguchi casually switches off on his final visit.<sup>53</sup> Despite Eguchi’s fantasies of violent murder and rape of the defenseless sleeping girls, this less forceful act of turning off the electric blanket is arguably the cause of death of the sleeping girl. This very small but murderous act of rebellion against the house has not been discussed in the existing literature; it has gone unnoticed. The lack of attention to this point is most likely related to its incomprehensibility. To my knowledge, only Lacan is able to offer an appropriate motive for Eguchi’s action. In the end, Eguchi could not fulfill his *jouissance* in a direct way through a physical rape of a girl. He had tried to justify his planned rape by calling it revenge on behalf of the other slighted old men who visited the hotel, but in the end that road was blocked by the signifier of virginity. Faced with the fact that all of the girls in the house were virgins yet also prostitutes, the only remaining act for Eguchi was to switch off the electric blanket, which he did with no explanation from either the narrator or Eguchi himself. It is almost as though he made the decision unconsciously. On the conscious level, Eguchi has no particular motive to hurt or kill the sleeping girl, but the locus of his behavior, as depicted by Kawabata, is not merely on the conscious level. His actions are ruled by an unconscious death drive, where resentment and hostility to others is a constant. Žižek explains that the death drive is “[t]he opposite of the symbolic order: the possibility of the ‘second death,’ the radical annihilation of the symbolic texture through which so-called reality is constituted.” According to Žižek the ultimate goal of the death drive and other negative actions that are generally inexplicable is a compulsive desire to “obliterate the signifying network itself.”<sup>54</sup> For Eguchi, the symbolic system is the inn which constrains him when he is there, and which controls his desire even when he is not, urging him to return. This can be analyzed as expressing Eguchi’s unconscious desire to free himself from the law of the father that the inn has become, and from the alienation that the symbolic world of the inn has created inside his psyche.

After turning off the blanket on the girl’s side, Eguchi turns towards the girl with a fair complexion. While she is under his gaze, unexpectedly, a thought enters his mind, much like one would expect in the free association of the psychoanalyst’s couch. As quoted above, he asks himself, “this is the last girl of my life, but who was the first?” His answer, “mother,” comes as a shock to Eguchi (but not to a Freudian). Moreover, the act of rule abrogation allows Eguchi to approach the truth of his desire. After that realization, he immediately falls asleep and dreams that his mother, who had died during his youth, is now waiting for him and his wife to return from their honeymoon in a house covered by red flowers. His mother

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52 Kawabata 1993, p. 37.

53 Kawabata 1993, p. 91.

54 Žižek 2009, p. 147. Here Žižek is discussing Lacan’s death drive as it appears in the late 1950s, particularly in Lacan’s *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*.

welcomes the wife into the home and we see the two female figures in close proximity, in a way fusing them into one.<sup>55</sup>

It is at this point that Kawabata seems to have an uncanny knowledge of Lacanian thought, or he has come to a similar conclusion consciously or unconsciously. At the beginning of this paper I suggested that Kawabata predicted Lacan's theory of language to some extent early in his career. I would like to give another example, from "Bokokugo no kitō" 母国語の祈禱, a short story published in 1928 which has been translated as "Prayer in the Mother Tongue" by Martin Holman.<sup>56</sup> I am using my own translation which is not as readable as Holman's excellent rendering, but more faithful to the original. In the opening of the story, the protagonist reads a book on linguistics that discusses how older immigrants who are on their deathbeds tend to speak their final words or prayers in their original native language even when they have not spoken it for years.

"[T]he prayer in the mother tongue" is something like an old custom that ties us down so tightly that we cannot move; we do not attempt to throw that rope off, rather isn't it the case that we use that rope as a crutch as we live our lives? From the long history of humanity, we are now like dead bodies held up and tied to a tree by that rope. If we were to cut the rope, we would fall to the ground. "The prayer in the mother tongue" is also just a manifestation of that fact.<sup>57</sup>

Here the original native language of the dying old immigrants returns for the purpose of sacred communication with God. Yet suddenly, Kawabata's narrator begins to discuss that as a "custom." A custom is a repetitive action which has meaning only because members of a society agree to it. (Thus it is similar to language itself.) Solace comes in the act of repetition, much like Freud's grandson overcame the pain of his mother's departure by endless repetition in the *fort-da* game.<sup>58</sup> Therefore, in this short story, the protagonist is approaching the essence of language. That is to say, he concludes that, through representation and repetition, humans no longer live their own lives. Custom or language does the living in their place. According to the narrator in the above, language murders the speaker; it removes his life, making the living easier. Years later, Lacan would remark, "[T]hus the symbol first manifests itself as the killing of the thing, and this death results in the endless perpetuation of the subject's desire."<sup>59</sup> As language at its core is law, or a system that restrains us, and removes our vitality, only the death drive, a violent break, a destruction of the symbolic system can free us from that control. In *House of the Sleeping Beauties*, Eguchi's motivation to do violence against the sleeping girls and his motivation in turning off the electric blanket originate in the death drive, which means a desire to destroy the symbolic order imposed by the house and the Madam, even if it means hurting the innocent sleeping

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55 Hara Zen discussed Kawabata's predilection to fuse various female characters (the mother, the wife, and the prostitute) into one image (Hara 1999, pp. 248–54). I would like to point out the similarity between this fusion of female characters and Freud's dream work of condensation, where multiple images or identities are condensed into one character or object in a dream.

56 Kawabata 1997, pp. 151–58.

57 Kawabata 1981, p. 224.

58 Freud 2001b, pp. 14–15.

59 Lacan 2006, p. 262.

beauties and himself—as he may be held responsible for the girl's death. The house affords Eguchi the opportunity to enjoy his desire, and it prolongs desire through prohibition, but at the same time it leads him to the point where he must destroy the object of desire and himself in a pathetic attempt to end the domination of the law or the big Other.

### Conclusion

The destructive and self-destructive acts that Eguchi ruminates over in *House of the Sleeping Beauties* are related to an unconscious desire to reject the name and law of the father in order to achieve *jouissance*, which lies somewhere on the far side of language. The rape Eguchi fantasizes about and his murderous act of switching off the electric blanket have an uncanny allure. However, Eguchi's woeful attempts to transgress the law result only in the death of an innocent young woman, and the aftermath sees Eguchi continuing to be dominated by the Madam's final law ordering him to stay in the house and enjoy the other, still living girl. The law of the house is both heartless and resilient. It absorbs his transgression; the body of the dead girl is taken elsewhere and disposed of. Eguchi is not able to destroy the house or free himself from the rules that control him there in spite of that girl's death. This failure marks Eguchi as an existential modern hero, unable to extract himself from his circumstances. It also points to the fact that *jouissance* is ultimately unattainable.

Furthermore, Eguchi's relationship to the object of desire, and the fact that the identity of the object itself slips from one sleeping girl to the next, to women he knew in his youth to his wife and finally to his own mother is in keeping with a Lacanian cosmology, where our desire and thought process are equated to the functioning of the signifier, which moves along metonymic and metaphoric pathways. The present reading of *House of the Sleeping Beauties* clarifies the nature of Eguchi's desire, showing that it is not merely a recognition of Eguchi's nostalgic longing for reunion with the body of the mother, but in fact the object of his desire is for a "nothing." The object of his desire is a black hole whirling on the other side of language. Around that black hole, caught in its traction, are various objects that have come to be associated with one another in a string of semantic connections or metaphors and metonyms, some of which are anchored in language (the symbolic), while others appear as images (the imaginary). Moreover, we are also shown that that desire for the various objects is fueled by their prohibition, maintained in a structure of law. Ultimately a destruction of that law seems to offer itself as the only way out of the impasse that the subject finds himself in. Thus, we see a strong connection between the death drive and language.

Finally, I would like to note two points in regard to the present analysis. First, this Lacanian reading is simultaneously in accordance with Kawabata's thinking as reflected in his early writings about language and psychoanalysis, as well as the themes seen in his early work, "Prayer in the Mother Tongue." *House of the Sleeping Beauties* can be read as uncovering Eguchi's true desires in a realm on the other side of language, self-knowledge and egocentric self-determination. Those unconscious desires are often base, grotesque, and unsightly, but through his narrative, Kawabata succeeds in representing the illogical and destructive forms that desire takes in his protagonist. Second, although literary criticism that draws on psychoanalysis is not uncommon, the concepts of psychoanalysis originate from a paradigm of mental health and Freud's science of the mind, not literary study. Yet an exchange of knowledge between these two categories is justified for the reason that the

novelist and the psychoanalyst work in the same currency of language and narrative. *House of the Sleeping Beauties* especially lends itself to the present reading, in part, due to its central theme of desire. However, I suspect a reevaluation of various modern Japanese literary texts from a standpoint informed by Lacanian thought and psychoanalysis could prove profitable in expanding our understanding of character motivation, the nature of desire, and the enigmatic, uncanny death drive.

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