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Elizabeth Wanning Harries



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OLD MEN AND COMATOSE VIRGINS: NOBEL PRIZE WINNERS REWRITE “SLEEPING BEAUTY”

The ancient story of “Sleeping Beauty” revolves around the awakening of a young princess whose long sleep is the result of a fairy’s curse. In some recent versions of the tale, however – notably by Yasunari Kawabata in *House of the Sleeping Beauties* (1961) and Gabriel García Márquez in *Memories of My Melancholy Whores* (2004) – the girls never wake up. Rather they give new life to the old men who watch and fondle them in their drugged state. In these novels young women continue to be represented as desirable ciphers. They also continue to be manipulated by older women (brothel keepers, replacing the traditional fairies) who determine their fate. But the central focus has become the old men themselves, their fear of aging, and their obsession with the comatose girls.

In their long histories, many well-known fairy tales have been reduced to a few stereotyped images in the popular imagination. To think of “Little Red Riding Hood”, for example, is to call up images of a conversation between a wolf and a little, red-capped girl at the edge of a forest, or of a wolf in a grandmother’s white-frilled nightcap. To think of “Cinderella” is to call up images of a glass slipper left on a staircase, or of a carriage transformed into a pumpkin. These images, particularly striking in Disney versions of the tales, control their every-day propagation and circulation. The tales are crystallized or frozen in these stereotyped images. As Jack Zipes says, in the introduction to his book *Fairy Tale as Myth/ Myth as Fairy Tale*, “The fairy tale, which has become the mythified classical fairy tale, is indeed petrified in its restored constellation: it is a stolen and frozen cultural good”¹.

1. J. Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale*, p. 7.

The story of “Sleeping Beauty” has undergone a similar reduction and condensation. The many early written versions of the tale – Basile’s, Perrault’s, the Grimms’, for example – differ in many striking ways. But most of us no longer register or remember the sly ironies in the narrative voice in Perrault’s version; or the detailed descriptions in both Perrault’s and the Grimms’ version of the sleeping castle; or the sequels in Basile’s and Perrault’s versions that deal with the princess’s subsequent pregnancy, children, and persecution by an ogress, who happens to be the prince’s mother. These differences have become obscured by the central images that we all know: the sudden appearance of an evil fairy at the christening feast, the princess sleeping in a castle surrounded by thickets or briars, the handsome young prince bending over to wake her with a kiss. These frozen, apparently timeless images have become the “classical” story of “Sleeping Beauty” for most people.

These images also form the basis for countless re-tellings of the tale, whether in picture books for children, romance novels for adults, or pornographic literature. Sometimes, however, they have been revised or reconfigured. In a disturbing series of well-known novels since the mid-twentieth century, for example, that young prince has been replaced by an aging man². And the princess, often drugged, often in fact a very young whore, rarely wakes. I want to look at some instances of this new pattern – and then spend a little time trying to figure out what it might mean.

Let’s begin with a shocking sentence: “The year I turned ninety, I wanted to give myself the gift of a night of wild love with an adolescent virgin.” This is the first sentence of Gabriel García Márquez’s latest novel, *Memories of My Melancholy Whores* (2004). The narrator, a life-long bachelor of ninety, finally finds what he calls “true love” with a drugged fourteen-year-old girl. She sleeps, or is knocked out by drugs, for almost the entire novel. As he says, “I preferred her asleep”³. He studies her body, reads to her, sings to her, plays her music while she is sleeping. The only thing she actually says in the novel, half-awake, is the cryptic “It was Isabel who made the snails cry”⁴. She is in fact

2. As Martine Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère has suggested, the fairy Maleficent in the Disney “Sleeping Beauty” shows the prince a threatening film within the film, where he is represented as an old man for whom fairytale romance is a thing of the past.

3. G. García Márquez, *Memories of My Melancholy Whores*, p. 77.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

the passive “Sleeping Beauty” of fairy-tale tradition, most alluring when she is breathing but unconscious, unmoving, unseeing, lying on a bed that suggests a catafalque or perhaps Snow White’s glass coffin. But her sleep is not the result of a fairy’s curse, but of drugs administered by the madam of a brothel.

As J. M. Coetzee pointed out in his review of the novel, called “Sleeping Beauty”, this old man/young girl pattern occurs in much of García Márquez’s other work: for example, in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* where Aureliano falls in love with a very young whore, or, tragically, in *Love in the Time of Cholera*⁵. As Coetzee also pointed out, García Márquez borrowed the plot of his latest novel from Yasunari Kawabata’s 1961 novella *House of the Sleeping Beauties*. The epigraph of García Márquez’s novel is the beginning of Kawabata’s novella, equally shocking in its way: “He was not to do anything in bad taste, the woman of the inn warned old Eguchi. He was not to put his finger into the mouth of the sleeping girl, or try anything else of that sort.” Like García Márquez’s central character, Eguchi goes to a brothel to find a young girl, and is repeatedly drawn back to the house to sleep beside, never with, a series of young girls. The fifth dies in their room, probably of a drug overdose, as Eguchi is sleeping between her and another young girl, but the owner of the brothel says, without emotion: “There is the other girl”⁶. In Kawabata’s novella, the dead girl is just one in a series of interchangeable sleeping girls, paid to be watched by an old man. And very close to the end of the novel Eguchi looks at the “other girl”:

The covers were as they had been, thrown back in confusion, and the naked form of the fair girl lay in shining beauty⁷.

5. J. M. Coetzee seems to believe that *Memories* is in part a reparation for the suicide of the hero’s fourteen-year-old lover América Vicuña in *Love in the Time of Cholera*: an unlikely scenario at best. García Márquez includes similar patterns in his long story “The Incredible and Sad Tale of Innocent Eréndira and Her Heartless Grandmother” (1978); in a slight little story called “Sleeping Beauty and the Airplane” published in the short story collection *Strange Pilgrims* (1993); in his strange novel, supposedly a version of a true story, *Of Love and Other Demons* (1995), and in his memoir *Living to Tell the Tale* (2003). (He first proposed to his wife Mercedes Barcha when she was thirteen.)

6. Y. Kawabata, *House of the Sleeping Beauties and Other Stories*, p. 98.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

What Coetzee does *not* say is that a similar pattern appears in some of his own fiction. At the beginning of his novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1960), the narrator, a middle-aged magistrate in a border town at the edge of an unnamed Empire, has a chaste but obsessive relationship with a captive barbarian girl. Like the other two narrators, he fondles her and then sleeps beside her:

Then, fully clothed, I lay myself down head to foot beside her. I fold her legs together in my arms, cradle my head on them, and in an instant am asleep⁸.

She represents an enigma he cannot solve; the marks on her body, relics of torture and abuse by representatives of the Empire, are “signs” he tries to decipher. In her very passivity she becomes even more of a mystery. Later in the novel, as he takes her back toward the hills where her supposed “barbarian” tribes live, they do have sexual relations – but this is just a brief episode. And even then he asks himself: “Is it she I want, or the traces of a history her body bears?”⁹. Unlike the first two narrators I’ve mentioned, he is mesmerized not by her beauty, but precisely by what mars it, what makes her a representative of her alien culture and its oppression by the Empire (a more conventional version of an older man watching a young girl sleeping appears in his later novel *Disgrace*).

Lurking behind all of these novels, of course, is Nabokov’s “Lolita”, first published in 1955, and Humbert Humbert’s sexual obsession with what he calls “nymphets”. For more than fifty years, in other words, some older male writers have been focusing explicitly on adolescent girls as sexual objects. At the end of Part I of Nabokov’s novel Humbert Humbert says: “You see, she [Lolita] had absolutely nowhere else to go”¹⁰; the barbarian girl in Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* echoes him when the magistrate asks her why she stays with him: “Because there is nowhere else to go”¹¹. Lolita’s mother, as Humbert finally reveals to her, is dead; the barbarian girl’s father, who has tried to protect her, has been killed, too. These adolescent girls have no choices, no options, no way out. They respond to the old men’s wishes – Lolita enthusiastically, for the most

8. J. M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, p. 29.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

10. V. Nabokov, “Lolita”, p. 133.

11. J. M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, p. 80.

part; the barbarian girl quietly – because they can't envision any future for themselves, because they are trapped in the cage of another's desire.

Consider Nabokov's or, more precisely, Humbert Humbert's strange definition of a nymphet:

Between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature, which is not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac); and these chosen creatures I propose to designate as "nymphets"¹².

A little later he calls one of them a "little deadly demon"¹³. Some adolescent girls, according to Humbert Humbert, have a certain mysterious power to bewitch and titillate older men. He filters his obsessions through Edgar Allan Poe's poem "Annabel Lee"; the original title of "Lolita", in fact, was "The Kingdom By the Sea", taken from the second line of Poe's poem. Humbert Humbert refers obliquely to Poe's marriage to a sixteen-year-old dying girl, as well as his own teen-age love affair on the Riviera with a girl named Annabel Leigh (note spelling), who died of typhoid a few months later. He also echoes the longing for the beautiful yet still desirable dead girl found in Poe's stories "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "Ligeia". Nymphets, for Humbert Humbert, combine the virginal and innocent with the daemonic and deathly. Though Lolita herself is a product of mid-twentieth century North American pop culture – with her chewing gum and bobbie pins and comics and cokes and dark glasses and short shorts – she is also an avatar of the tradition of the beautiful dead girl. Humbert Humbert occasionally alludes to the last lines of Poe's "Annabel Lee"; they sound frequently beneath his pursuit of the hapless girl:

And so, all the night tide, I lie down by the side
Of my darling – my darling – my life and my bride,
In the sepulcher there by the sea –
In her tomb by the sounding sea¹⁴.

12. V. Nabokov, "Lolita", p. 14.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 15. See M. Viegnès's contribution to the volume on fin-de-siècle fairy tale rewritings featuring very young women who are at once muses, saints and whores; see also M. Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère's article on Carter's inversion of the passive Sleeping Beauty motif in her vampire fiction.

14. Last lines of "Annabel Lee".

When he first sees Lolita, in fact, he says that “a blue sea-wave swelled under my heart”¹⁵. The sea – in the predictable ebb and flow of its tides, in the constant movement of its surface – suggests the regular beating of the heart, as well as the possibility of change. Kawabata’s “house” is also close to the sea; the sound of waves is always in the background. On Eguchi’s first night at the brothel, he connects the regular breathing of the sleeping girl and the waves:

The roar of the waves against the cliff softened while rising. Its echo seemed to come up from the ocean as music sounding in the girl’s body, the beating in her breast, and the pulse at her wrist added to it¹⁶.

Later, water imagery helps define his sense of renewal as he begins to fall asleep with another girl’s arm over his eyes:

What flowed deep behind his eyelids from the girl’s arm was the current of life, the melody of life, the lure of life, and, for an old man, the recovery of life¹⁷.

The rhythms of life, these novels suggest, mimic the rhythms of the sea.

García Márquez also echoes this sea imagery in his strange 1995 novel *Of Love and Other Demons*, describing the sleeping twelve-year-old marquise Sierva Maria: “She seemed dead, but her eyes held the light of the sea”¹⁸. And, at the end when she does lie dead:

[...] of love [and of eighteenth-century exorcism] in her bed, her eyes [were] radiant and her skin like that of a new-born baby. Strands of hair *gushed like bubbles* as they grew back on her shaved head¹⁹.

According to García Márquez, who claims he witnessed the opening of her tomb in 1949, her hair had grown to “twenty-two meters, eleven centimeters”²⁰: “a *stream* of living hair the intense color of copper *spilled out* of the crypt”²¹. But García Márquez also uses water imagery

15. V. Nabokov, “Lolita”, p. 35.

16. Y. Kawabata, *House of the Sleeping Beauties and Other Stories*, p. 28.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

18. G. García Márquez, *Of Love and Other Demons*, p. 81.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 147.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

to play on the connections of hair with both life and death. In this mythical story, her hair continues to grow for centuries; some sort of life continues in the crypt, in a modern version of a medieval miracle. As Marina Warner says in her chapter “The Language of Hair” in *From the Beast to the Blonde*:

Hair is both the sign of the animal in the human, and all that means in terms of our tradition of associating the beast with the bestial, nature and the natural with the inferior and reprehensible aspects of humanity; on the other hand, hair is also the least fleshly production of the flesh. In its suspended corruptibility, it seems to transcend the mortal condition, to be in full possession of the principle of vitality itself²².

García Márquez’s twelve-year-old’s hair is not blonde, like the hair of so many innocent fairy tale princesses. (Neither is Lolita’s.) Its vibrant copper color suggests the double meaning Warner has teased out. On the one hand, it stands for Sierva Maria’s daemonic animal nature, untrammelled by civilized convention; on the other, it stands for her vitality even in death.

The girls in García Márquez’s and Kawabata’s work often sleep in a liminal space between life and death. Drugs, of course, also induce a state between sleeping and waking. They play a crucial part in Nabokov, Kawabata, and García Márquez’s *Memories of My Melancholy Whores*. Humbert Humbert knows that Lolita will be fascinated by a seductive-looking pill he extracts from a bottle of “Papa’s Purple Pills”:

As I expected, she pounced upon the vial with its plump, beautifully colored capsules loaded with Beauty’s sleep²³.

The drug doesn’t work as well as he expects, but he has set the stage for a series of drugged virgins in Kawabata and García Márquez. Their old men do not require any response from the young girls. They are content to be onlookers, participating vicariously in the life-in-death and death-in-life of the girls they pay to watch. As García Márquez’s central character says, with a weird twist on Dante’s *Vita Nuova*, his one-sided relationship with the girl he calls Delgadina (probably from a

22. M. Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde*, p. 373.

23. V. Nabokov, “Lolita”, p. 114.

well-known Spanish ballad about a princess trying to escape the attentions of her father²⁴) “was the beginning of a new life at an age [ninety] when most mortals have already died”²⁵.

All of the writers I’ve mentioned so far – García Márquez, Kawabata, Coetzee, and Nabokov – were over fifty when they wrote the novels I’ve spent the most time on. Three of them – all except Nabokov – have won the Nobel Prize for Literature, in addition to many other prizes. Another well-known older writer, John Updike, in his 2005 review of *Memories of My Melancholy Whores*, called the novel “a velvety pleasure to read, though somewhat disagreeable to contemplate”²⁶. Though he acknowledged that the central situation is disturbing, he emphasized the beauty of García Márquez’s writing. Though he showed that these girls are actually victims of the cruel “economic system that turns young girls into fair game for sexual predators”, he still found the novel only “somewhat disagreeable to contemplate”.

How are we to understand this pattern or syndrome? Why do so many readers seem to accept it without comment? And why do so many of our most-acclaimed and most-read contemporary writers return to it so often? Versions of “Sleeping Beauty” have often verged on the obsessive and pornographic. Think of many nineteenth-century illustrations, or of twentieth-century novels like Robert Coover’s *Briar Rose* (to say nothing of Anne Rice/Roquelaure’s *Sleeping Beauty* trilogy). And if you Google “Sleeping Beauties” today, nearly two hundred years after many of the traditional images, the first thing that comes up is a soft porn site, featuring limp, comatose girls²⁷. Even Tennyson, in an early poem called “Sleeping Beauty” (1830) focuses on the sleeper’s erotic stasis:

She sleeps: on either hand upswells
The gold-fringed pillow lightly prest:
She sleeps, nor dreams, but ever dwells
A perfect form in perfect rest²⁸.

24. See G. H. Bell-Villada’s *García Márquez*, p. 263-264, for a useful discussion of the Spanish ballad “El Rey tenía tres hijas”.

25. G. García Márquez, *Memories of My Melancholy Whores*, p. 5.

26. J. Updike, “Dying for Love”.

27. See <http://www.sleeping-beauties.com/> (May 25, 2011).

28. A. Tennyson, “Sleeping Beauty”, v. 21-24.

Though that “upswelling” pillow is certainly suggestive, Tennyson skirts the sexual here, focusing on his Beauty’s absolute motionlessness as a sleeping work of art. As Hélène Cixous said in the 1970s:

Beauties slept in their woods, waiting for princes to come and wake them up. In their beds, in their glass coffins, in their childhood forests like dead women. Beautiful, but passive: hence desirable: all mystery emanates from them²⁹.

Fashion photography also continues to give us apparently sleeping young girls as images of the ultimate desirability. In his recent artist’s book *Sleeping Beauty* (2008), John Sparagana reproduces some fashion photographs, then hides part of each one behind a gauzy layer of distressed or fatigued paper that he has gently crumpled (fig. 1). We often have to look harder to see the models themselves beneath the lacy veils he has produced. Mieke Bal – the cultural critic who wrote the accompanying commentary – argues that he has turned consumer culture into high art, slick, vulgar images into something more individual and more telling. But she also seems to suspect that his images may intensify the original, supposedly glamorous moment:

I wonder if giving the image a new life as art is a way of offering the desired glamour, after all...her face behind the opaque curtain of fatigued surface looks pretty dead to me. Are you [she’s speaking to the artist here] reviving her, like the fairy-tale sleeping beauties waiting for princes on white horses ...?³⁰

In other words, as Sparagana re-imagines these images, is he in fact reproducing the age-old pattern, the beautiful but comatose young woman exposed to the viewer’s gaze? Does the visual difficulty he has created in seeing the pattern in fact just make us look harder, make us even more voyeuristic than we are in more conventional “Sleeping Beauty” tableaux? In spite of many decades of feminist critique of this pattern, as Bal suggests, the “princes on white horses” are still in the background, the sleeping beauties still waiting to be revived.

But why old men instead of the long-awaited young princes? What changes when the voyeur is an old man? When the young woman’s body

29. H. Cixous, “Sorties”, p. 65-66.

30. M. Bal commentary, p. 95.



Fig. 1 — John Sparagana, Plate 2 from the artist's book *Sleeping Beauty: A One-Artist Dictionary*, with text by Mieke Bal (Chicago: 2008). Art © John Sparagana.

is for sale, and she is drugged? What is happening to the age-old plot? Or, what do these recent versions show us about the old story? As Eguchi, the central character of Kawabata's novella, says, "An old man lives next door to death"³¹. Or, as his older friend Kiga has told him, "only when he was beside a girl who had been put to sleep could he himself feel alive"³². Why do these old men think comatose girls – apparently hovering between life and death – can bring them back to life?

Earlier I talked about some strands of imagery that run through these novels, the ways the sleeping girls are associated with the sea and water, ever-growing hair, poems like Poe's "Annabel Lee" and the tradition of the dead – and therefore even more desirable – girl. But I haven't looked very closely at the old men themselves – and what makes them candidates for these obsessive relationships. At one point, just after his definition of the "nymphet", Humbert Humbert tries to define the other side of the equation:

31. Y. Kawabata, *House of the Sleeping Beauties and Other Stories*, p. 81.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

Furthermore, since the idea of time plays such a magic part in the matter, the student should not be surprised to learn that there must be a gap of several years, never less than ten I should say, generally thirty or forty, and as many as ninety in a few known cases, between maiden and man to enable the latter to come under the nymphet's spell³³.

"The idea of time" plays a crucial or "magic" part in novels about old men and young girls. As Nabokov seems to know, the story of "Sleeping Beauty" has always been about time and stasis. Beauty's hundred-year sleep – most vivid in the Grimms' version, where everyone and everything in the castle is suspended, including a buzzing fly – is at the heart of the story as we now understand it. Time stopped and then re-started is the central magical *topos* that makes the tale in the versions that are the most common today³⁴.

The idea that time can be suspended – as in death – and then resume its regular rhythms might be particularly appealing to old men. (I suppose to old women, too, though they don't seem to write about this.) The age difference that Nabokov posits as crucial to the nymphet syndrome suggests that the flow of time can not only be stopped, but also be re-synchronizd: the flickering life of an old man brought into the rhythms of the life of a very young girl, the death-like sleep leading to an awakening and a resumption of those rhythms. These Beauties are poised on the edge of adulthood – like the traditional Sleeping Beauty, who is fifteen in both Perrault's and the Grimms' versions when she pricks her finger with the spindle. But these new Beauties are already involved in the very adult world of sexual commerce, or political torture, and/or other violations. To the old men who watch them, however, they still represent another world where innocence and a timeless sleep, undisturbed by bad dreams and the pricks of conscience, are still possible. As Humbert Humbert says, "all this gets mixed up with the exquisite stainless tenderness seeping through the musk and the mud, through the dirt and

33. V. Nabokov, "Lolita", p. 15.

34. Molly Hillard, in "A Perfect Form in Perfect Rest" explores the Victorian notions of time and progress in relationship to the tropes of "Sleeping Beauty". She is particularly illuminating about the Victorian and current forgetting of early Catalan, French, and Italian versions that have a much shorter sleep (a significant nine months, in Basile's version) and that center on a rape of the unconscious princess. See also D. Haase's contribution to this volume.

death, oh God, / oh God”³⁵. “Dirt and death” seem to be the portion allotted to men nearing the end of their lives; these girls, even though their bodies are on display or for sale, represent the “exquisite stainless tenderness” that the old men still can recognize, and envy. Their bodies become the locus for meditations on time, sex, even art and beauty itself.

In some ways this scene is the opposite of the one in the traditional “Sleeping Beauty” script. The prince is a man of action, ready to wake the princess and carry her away; the old men merely want to watch, unsure as they are of their sexual abilities, fearful as they are of the girls’ mockery³⁶. As Kawabata’s narrator says:

She was not a living doll. For there could be no living doll, but, so as not to shame a man no longer a man, she had been made into a living toy. No, not a toy; for the old men, she could be life itself. Such life was, perhaps, life to be touched with confidence³⁷.

Kawabata stresses the sexual uncertainty of the “man no longer a man”, as well as his distance from life and his lack of confidence in approaching it. The young girl is described in an ascending series from “living doll” to “living toy” to “life itself”. Lacking all individuality, she has become an abstraction, a symbol of the “life” the old man no longer feels part of.

Joseph Cornell’s untitled box in the Museum of Modern Art in New York, sometimes called “Bébé Marie” (fig. 2) could be a “living doll”, surrounded by a forest of twigs like Sleeping Beauty behind the hedge of thorns, staring wide-eyed at the viewer. (The doll came from an attic in a relative’s home. We know that Cornell experimented with installations featuring the doll in other positions – sitting as if holding court, for example – but in his final image she is lying or standing up as in a waking sleep³⁸.) As the poet Charles Simic says, in his wonderful book about Cornell’s boxes, *Dime-Store Alchemy*, “her eyes are wide open so that she can watch us watching her. / All this is vaguely erotic and sinister”³⁹. Cornell was often obsessed by certain young women – often waitresses or cash-register clerks – who played a part in his private fairy-

35. V. Nabokov, “Lolita”, p. 40-41.

36. Thanks to my friend and colleague Luc Gillemann for this formulation.

37. Y. Kawabata, *House of the Sleeping Beauties and Other Stories*, p. 20.

38. L. Hartigan, *Joseph Cornell*, p. 53-54.

39. Ch. Simic, *Dime-Store Alchemy*, p. 47.

tale mythology; in 1963 he wrote of “trying to catch the magic by which maiden becomes magical and the renewal so precious when it comes so authentically, so unsuspectingly”⁴⁰. Like the other old men I’ve been talking about, Cornell too found a source of “renewal” in his encounters with these “magical” young women. But their magic is impersonal, born simply of their youth and slightly tainted innocence. “Bébé Marie” could stand as a figure for all of them.

The princes in the traditional tales are men of action and want to bring the girl’s sleep to a conclusion; the old men are simply watchers and want the erotic scene to continue forever, without an end. Yet both the prince’s action and the old men’s watching depend on the sleeping central figure. She is central to the story, but her personality, her dreams, her history, and her daily life are completely irrelevant – even more in these new versions of the tale than they were in the old ones⁴¹.

The madams who run the brothels also see the girls in themselves as irrelevant, as bodies or commodities but not as persons. These women resemble the evil fairy who seizes the power to determine a young girl’s life in many traditional versions of “Sleeping Beauty”. In Kawabata’s *House of the Sleeping Beauties*, she is left-handed (or sinister); there is also an ominous bird on the knot of her *obi*; the narrator finds her laughter “diabolical”⁴²; and her flat comment to Eguchi after the death of the girl – “Go on back to sleep. There is the other girl”⁴³ – suggests her moral detachment.

Rosa Cabarcas, who procures the young virgin for García Márquez’s narrator, has often found women for him earlier. In fact he boasts that he has never slept with a woman he hasn’t paid, and has a list of the 514 he slept with before he was fifty – perhaps a subterranean Don Juan

40. Quoted in Mary Ann Caws (ed.), *Joseph Cornell: Theater of the Mind*, p. 45.

41. In her essay “The Wilderness Within”, Ursula Le Guin quotes a poem by Sylvia Townsend Warner called “Sleeping Beauty”: “The Sleeping Beauty woke: | The spit began to turn, | The woodmen cleared the brake. | The gardener mowed the lawn. | Woe’s me! And must one kiss | Revoke the silent house, the birdsong wilderness?” (in Warner’s *Collected Poems*). Le Guin goes on to comment: “But at least she had a little while by herself, in the house that was hers, the garden of silences. Too many Beauties never even know there is such a place” (p. 111). The Beauties in the novels I’ve been discussing never have such a chance.

42. Y. Kawabata, *House of the Sleeping Beauties and Other Stories*, p. 82.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

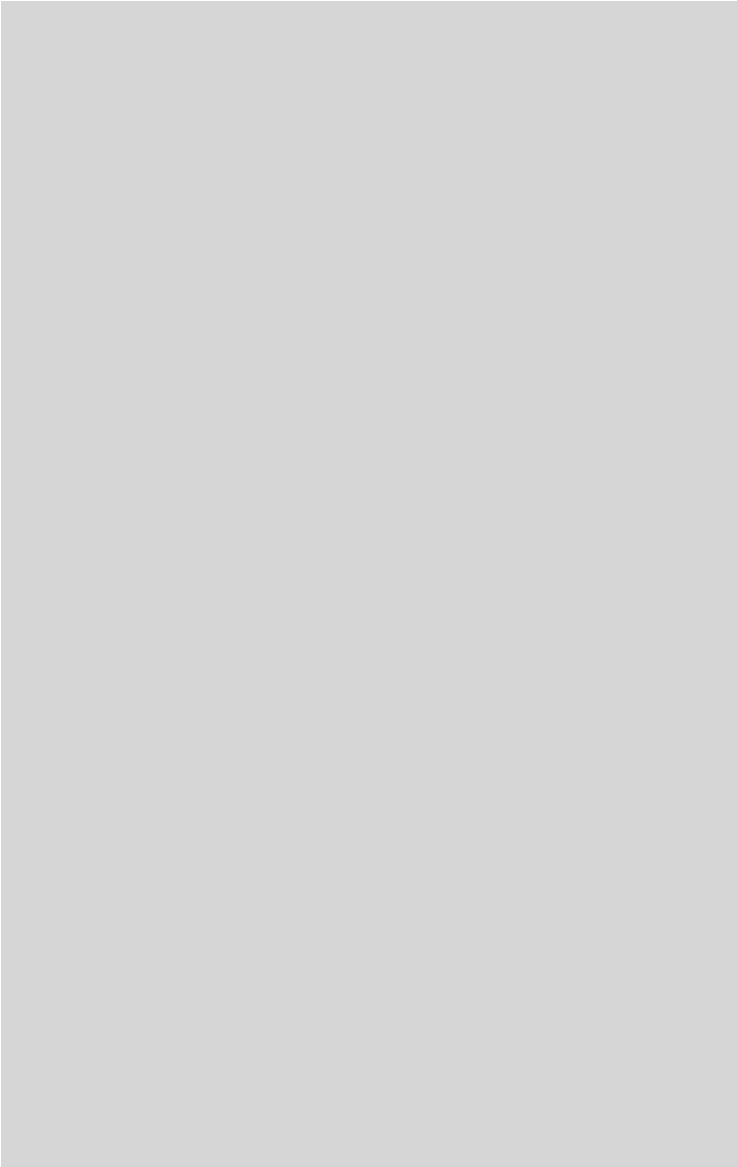


Fig. 2 — Joseph Cornell, “Untitled (Bébé Marie)”. Early 1940s. Papered and painted wood box, with painted corrugated cardboard floor, containing doll in cloth dress and straw hat with cloth flowers, dried flowers, and twigs, flecked with paint. 59.7 x 31.5 x 13.3 cm. Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest. Digital Image Museum of Modern Art/ Licensed by SCALA/ Art Resource, NY. Art © The Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation/ Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

reference. Rosa has gotten older, too, of course, and “only her clear, cruel eyes were still animated”⁴⁴. Earlier she would say to the narrator, “with a malevolent smile”: “Morality, too, is a question of time”⁴⁵. For Rosa, everything is relative; she knows that her clients’ sexual tastes and proclivities will change as they age. Her matter-of-fact cruelty and moral indifference to the fate of “Delgadina” mark her as another evil fairy⁴⁶.

The girls in themselves do not matter. They are not individuals, but counters in an economic exchange between the old men and the brothel-keepers – and figures for erotic/aesthetic contemplation. In their youthful perfection, they become works of art, like Tennyson’s “Sleeping Beauty”. The narrators observe and catalogue their perfect body parts, as in the Renaissance *blazon*. Yukio Mishima says, in his introduction to the 1969 paperback edition of the *House of the Sleeping Beauties*:

Lust inevitably attaches itself to fragments, and, quite without subjectivity, the sleeping beauties themselves are fragments of human beings, urging lust to its greatest intensity. And, paradoxically, a beautiful corpse, from which the last traces of spirit have gone, gives rise to the strongest feelings of life⁴⁷.

Mishima acknowledges that the girls are “quite without subjectivity”; their perspective is rarely considered. The only subjectivity continuously in play in these novels, in fact, is the subjectivity of the old men/narrators, whose tawdry stories are all told from their perspective. The story has become their story, of their ever-present fear of aging and its physical manifestations, of their need to be brought back to life by the vital spark in the comatose girls.

This is yet another way that these new versions of “Sleeping Beauty” differ from the traditional cultural scripts. In the old stories it is always the princess herself who is brought back to life. In these new versions, however, the girls are the unconscious agents who bring about a transformation or

44. G. García Márquez, *Memories of My Melancholy Whores*, p. 22.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

46. It seems very unlikely that Rosa Cabarcas will live up to the terms of the pact she makes with the narrator: that they both will leave everything to each other, and that the survivor will leave everything to the girl. Perhaps this pact (and his faith in it) is simply a function of the narrator’s delirious happiness at the end of the novel, as he looks forward to his tenth decade.

47. Y. Kawabata, *House of the Sleeping Beauties and Other Stories*, p. 8.

rebirth in the old men who watch them sleeping – temporary in most of the cases, apparently permanent in García Márquez’s novel (or at least until the narrator’s hundredth birthday). The focus of the story has changed, from a tale about the sleeping princess to a tale of an aging man⁴⁸.

The traditional “Sleeping Beauty” is told by an omniscient, quite laconic narrator. All these old men, on the other hand, tell their own rather creepy story. In Nabokov’s “Lolita”, Humbert Humbert addresses himself to the hypothetical jury who will try him for the murder of the man who has rescued Lolita – not, interestingly enough, for his self-centered pursuit and capture of a very young girl, or his complicity in her mother’s death. We gradually become aware that his account of events is completely unreliable, that his vision of the world is skewed and dangerous. Nabokov wants us to see that Humbert Humbert’s attempt to control Lolita’s life is perverted – not just because he has sexual relations with a minor, but because he can allow her no independent life of her own. We glimpse a world where other relationships would be possible, but Humbert Humbert can never acknowledge it.

Coetzee’s magistrate attempts to understand his own actions and feelings, exploring and judging them. Unlike the other narrators, he moves beyond the watching and possessing phase, eventually riding for weeks through the desert toward the mountains to return her to her “barbarian” tribe. He asks her to return to the town with him, but accepts her refusal without surprise or rancor. He now sees her as “a stranger, a visitor from strange parts now on her way home after a less than happy visit”⁴⁹. And later, when he has returned to the town, he continues

48. Julia Leigh’s film “Sleeping Beauty”, shown at Cannes in Spring, 2011, is said to be based on Kawabata’s novel, possibly García Márquez’s as well. Unlike these novels, the film apparently gives the “living doll’s” pre-history as a student and occasional part-time worker. Judging from the trailer and the one clip currently available, however, she is just as passive and silent as Kawabata’s young girls. (In the clip she is being examined and judged, first by a woman and then by a man, for her physical perfection. She usually responds to their commands and questions with a movement or just a shake of the head, but when the man finds a tiny flaw in the skin of her thigh, she says, without apparent irony, “They removed a beauty spot”, <http://www.imdb.com/video/imdb/vi209362201/> Accessed May 25, 2011.) Jane Campion – the author and director of “The Piano”, the 1993 film based in part on versions of “Bluebeard” – both presents the film and hails it as “extraordinary”, “sensuous”, “unafraid” in the trailer. The audience at Cannes was less convinced.

49. J. M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, p. 71-72.

to cast “one net of meaning after another over her”, trying to “make reparation”⁵⁰ as a failed father figure and failed lover.

Unlike the thoughtful magistrate, Kawabata’s narrator Eguchi is striking in his narcissistic self-absorption – as is García Márquez’s narrator. They both attempt to justify their own actions by explaining their feelings, oblivious to any feelings the comatose girls might have. You might call them, paradoxically, solipsists of love. And it is difficult, in their novels, to distinguish the narrator’s views from the author’s, as we gradually can in “Lolita”. We see only their perspectives, their desires. (In fact, Terence Rafferty, a reviewer for *The New York Times*, said that “The cunning of *Memories* lies in the utter – and utterly unexpected – reliability of the narrator”⁵¹.) Kawabata’s novel ends with the death of a girl, but with the narrator turning toward the “other” one; García Márquez’s with the prospect of another delirious ten years with his “Delgadina”:

It was, at last, real life, with my heart safe and condemned to die of happy love in the joyful agony of any day after my hundredth birthday⁵².

The lives and bodies of the girls exist only for the old men who watch them. The girls must stay asleep – or die – so that the old men may come to life.

Why have these well-known writers re-configured the “Sleeping Beauty” tale in this way? Over the last thirty or forty years, feminist critics have repeatedly pointed out the dangers of and the misogyny behind what we might call the “Sleeping Beauty syndrome”. Coetzee’s narrator in *Disgrace* says that “Half of literature is about...young women struggling to escape from under the weight of old men, for the sake of the species”⁵³. But, in a quietly perverse, perhaps deliberately politically incorrect way, these authors, in particular Kawabata and García Márquez, in fact repeat and sometimes even intensify the “Sleeping Beauty syndrome”, obliterate the personhood of the traditional central figure even more completely, and center the tale on an aging man⁵⁴. These young women do not have a chance to struggle at all.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

51. Review by Terence Rafferty, *The New York Times*, November 5, 2004.

52. G. García Márquez, *Memories of My Melancholy Whores*, p. 115.

53. J. M. Coetzee, *Disgrace*, p. 190.

54. In his review of *Memories of My Melancholy Whores*, Coetzee argues that “the goal of *Memories* is a brave one: to speak on behalf of the desire of older men for underage

To quote Yukio Mishima again, “a beautiful corpse, from which the last traces of spirit have gone, gives rise to the strongest feelings of life”⁵⁵. For the old men, for some influential writer/critics – like Updike, Coetzee, and Mishima – who set the stage for the giving of prizes, and, apparently, for many of their readers⁵⁶. Kawabata and García Márquez have both revised the stereotyped cluster of “Sleeping Beauty” images. Sometimes revisions question the ideologies that lie beneath such images, or expose notions about them that are often taken for granted. One recent critic has in fact argued that García Marquez is questioning our cultural assumptions about calm, sexless old age and about the moral perfidy of paedophilia⁵⁷. But their revisions have, if anything, intensified the dominant male perspective and the misogyny that lie embedded in the stereotype. The comatose virgin now literally has no voice at all. She is no longer a princess, but a young woman from the lower classes, whose family desperately needs more money. She has been turned into a commodity, defined by the economic transactions between the old men and the brothel keepers. The sleeping, “frozen” fairy tale has become a commodity, too, defined by the writers who exploit it, even if in new ways, and the critics and prize-givers who sanction that exploitation.

Elizabeth Wanning HARRIES
Smith College

girls, that is, to speak on behalf of pedophilia, or at least show that pedophilia need not be a dead end for either lover or beloved”. See also section 12, “On Paedophilia”, in Coetzee’s novel *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007). In it he seems to criticize all attempts to work against sex with minors and its representation as prudish censorship. (Here, as in the other novels I’ve been talking about by Kawabata and García Márquez, it’s difficult to distinguish the author and the narrator. There are many parallels between Coetzee’s own opinions, published in a variety of essays, and his character’s.)

55. Y. Kawabata, *House of the Sleeping Beauties and Other Stories*, p. 8.

56. I don’t have the space here to explore the many “real life” versions of this syndrome: think of David and Bathsheba, or Mahatma Gandhi and his twelve-year-old niece, or Carl Tanzler von Cosel and Milena Elena Milagro de Hoyos. The controversy surrounding Roman Polanski’s extradition from Switzerland – for statutory rape in California more than thirty years ago – was raging as I worked on this article.

57. See M. I. Millington’s essay “García Márquez’s Novels of Love”, p. 127.

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