

# An Analysis of Yasunari Kawabata's *House of the Sleeping Beauties and Other Stories*

## ---Centering on Beauty and Ugliness, Life and Death

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**Abstract.** Yasunari Kawabata's novel *House of the sleeping beauties and other stories* tells the story of an old man named Eguchi who was introduced to a hotel called House of the sleeping beauties for nights. This hotel caters for the elderly. Every old man is provided a sleeping girl who is taken with a special medicine and cannot wake up. The old man Eguchi met six sleeping beauties here. As such a special setting, the encounter between the old and young women forms two kinds of contrast - beauty and ugliness, young and old. What does the author want to express through this novel? In order to solve this problem, this paper will try to discuss it by citing the original text. Generally, this paper is divided into eight parts, including the roles' analyses, the characteristics and meanings of the beauty of sleeping beauties, the attitude of the elderly towards the beauty of sleeping beauties, the functions of sleeping beauties, and so on. Through these analyses, the two contrasts reflected in this novel, beauty and ugliness, life and death will be discussed. We will see the oppositions and connections between them in this novel.

### Analyses of the Characters in *House of the Sleeping Beauties and Other Stories*

Before analyzing the content of this novel, it is necessary to give a brief introduction to the characters in this novel. In this novel, there are three main characters – the woman, Eguchi and sleeping beauties. The story happened in a hotel-style brothel, which has two floors and can only accommodate a few guests and sleeping beauties. What are the roles of the woman, Eguchi and beauties in this novel?

There are several descriptions about the appearance of the woman, the owner of this hotel, “Her dark eyes not only had an air of relaxation of vigilance, but also an accustomed calmness, which makes people lose their guard against her” “The pattern on the back of her belt was a very big strange bird. No one knows what bird it is. Why put realistic eyes and claws on such a decorated bird? ”[1] ,“accustomed calmness” shows that the woman has been doing this job for a long time. The pattern of her belt seems to imply that she is a decorated person, what she really cares about is the customers' money, just like the "eyes and claws" of the strange bird. The novel's author seems to want to use these descriptions to describe what kind of role the woman is. In addition, some dialogues in this novel can also show that the woman is a cold, ruthless person. In the last part of this novel, the last girl who was sleeping with Eguchi died, while the woman was still calm, she said “Please don't make too much publicity. We will never give you any trouble... nor will we give your name to others... Please don't worry about it and have a good rest. There's another girl” [2], even if the girl died, the woman was still very calm. These words hurt the heart of Eguchi.

As for these beauties who sleep with old men, according to the descriptions in this novel, these beauties are more like objects than living lives. “When the old man got into bed, the girl did not seem to respond, such as shrugging her chest or pulling her waist. For a young woman, even if she is sleeping soundly, there will always be such a sensitive conditioned reflex, but it seems that she is sleeping extraordinarily well” [3]. The roles of these beauties have several aspects. On the one hand, they are beautiful. Some beauties call their mothers in their dreams. The sadness revealed by these cries permeates into the heart of Eguchi, “The sadness contained in the girl's voice calling for her mother penetrated into the heart of Eguchi”[4]. They are also protected from entertaining guests like prostitutes, and the old people who come to this hotel can not violate these beauties. On the other

hand, they are also numb and emotionless. As mentioned in this novel, they only have women's bodies. Some of the old people who stayed here overnight died of illness. The beauties did not even realize that and they had no sympathy for the old people's deaths the next day, which showed their numbness.

As for Eguchi, he has entered his twilight years. Coming to the house of sleeping beauties is also a symbol of his aging. In front of these beauties, he hesitated. He has a protective attitude toward the beauty of beauties. He doesn't want to destroy the beauty here. He even sympathizes with these beauties. He realized the ugliness of the old people who came here himself. These old men's aging is in sharp contrast to the young girls, so they always have "sad happiness" and "deep sorrow". They are not sticking to the oath, intentionally maintaining the purity of the girl, but aging makes them can do nothing. Beauty and ugliness are contrasted here. According to Eguchi's memory in this novel, he has been pursuing beauties all his life and met many lovers. Therefore, Eguchi is a man who pursues beauty, and what he values most is the beauty of the girl's soul, "It was a snowy night. Young Eguchi took a breath for the beauty and was moved almost to tears. For decades afterwards, he never saw that kind of beauty in the women he had met. He gradually understood that beauty, and gradually realized that the beauty of the secret place was the beauty of the girl's soul" [5]. As a representative, the old people like Eguchi who come to the house of the sleeping beauties are deeply aware of their aging and ugliness. They are deeply saddened by the beauty presented by these beauties.

The woman, sleeping beauties and Eguchi are different roles. The woman is cold and ruthless, she brings young beauties to sleep with the elderly for the sake of profit; beauties come to spend nights with old people for money, they are beautiful, but they are also numb, emotionless, and unlike ordinary prostitutes, they will not lose their virginity here; Eguchi pursues beauty all his life, and now he has to face his aging. He knows the ugliness of his behavior, which contrasts with the beauty here. As for the symbolic meanings of sleeping beauties and Eguchi, first of all, beauties are asleep and will not communicate with the elderly. When they are asleep, they present a kind of natural beauty, which symbolizes beauty and young life, and this beauty is continuous and inviolable. The old men like Eguchi symbolize aging and ugliness, contrasting with the youth and beauty of beauties. This hotel is the link between beauty and ugliness. Through the special setting of sleeping beauties and the elderly, this novel separates the producer and the appreciator of this kind of beauty, symbolizing that this kind of beauty is pure and not polluted. The old people like Eguchi are not only representatives of ugliness, but also appreciators of beauty.

### **Characteristics of the Beauty of Sleeping Beauties**

As for the characteristics of the beauty of sleeping beauties, first of all, the beauty is pure, natural and unadorned. There are some words in the descriptions of these beauties' sleeping in this novel, the girl "sleeps so innocently, fragrantly, peacefully". Therefore, one of the characteristics of the beauty embodied by sleeping beauties is innocence and naturalness, and the attitude towards this kind of beauty, as mentioned in the novel, Eguchi carefully takes care of it for fear of destroying this kind of beauty, "Even pulling his arms out of the girl's neck was carried out carefully, as if dealing with fragile things..."[6].

Secondly, no matter how dirty the old people think about these beauties, these beauties know nothing and keeps the posture all the time, and the old people can't invade this kind of beauty. "There seems to be greedy people among the old people, and Eguchi 's mind is not without the idea of excessive greed. But when the girl was asleep, she didn't know anything, so would her appearance then be neither dirty nor deformed, as it was seen here?" [7]. In addition, the beauty of beauties is inclusive, waking women usually choose men, while sleeping beauties can accept anyone. It is precisely because the sleeping beauties' beauty is tolerant and lasting that Eguchi feels that no matter how much it costs, it is also worth it.

Thirdly, the beauty is short. Once the beauty wakes up, this kind of beauty will be destroyed. In the novel, the old man Eguchi fears that his behavior will lead to the girl's awakening and once she wakes up, the silent and static beauty will suddenly stop, "Eguchi has tried twice to wake up the girl,

though in light motion. What would he do if the girl really woke up in case of a mistake? He didn't know. Maybe it was love for the girl" [8]. As mentioned in this novel, Eguchi realized that this kind of beauty could not last forever, "She's not going to sleep forever." [9]. Watching the girl's sleeping, Eguchi remembered the story of his ex-girlfriend being taken home to marry after she failed to elope with him. When Eguchi encountered the girl again in the park, the feelings between them have vanished. They live for their own families and have no nostalgia for each other. The past is also a kind of disappearance of beauty and regret for Eguchi.

### **The Old Man's Attitude towards the Beauty of Sleeping Beauties**

The old man Eguchi has pursued many young beauties all his life, but when old age is approaching, only sleeping beauties can listen to him, arouse his memories and youth. Although he realizes the ugliness of this behavior, sleeping beauties become his only hope. So what kind of mentality does Eguchi have towards these sleeping beauties?

As described in this novel, Eguchi cherishes the virginity of beauties, "From tomorrow on, if the girl know she is no longer a virgin, how sad she would be. I don't know what will happen to the girl's life" [10]. When the sleeping beauty was with him, Eguchi saw her sleepless and tried to wake her up. It was the love that led to this action, "Wake up! Wake up! Eguchi seized the girl's shoulder and shook it for a while" [11]. In addition, from some descriptions in this novel, we can see the old man's kindness to the beauties like his own children. "But the little girl was asleep with her mouth open and her tender tongue exposed. If Eguchi put his fingers on it, the tongue might be as round as a baby sucking the nipples" [12]. Eguchi has no sexual desire for these beauties, but a kind of compassion like treating his own children, "Eguchi only touched the girl's breast to see if it was wet. He did not have the crazy energy in his heart, nor did he want the girl who woke up to herself to be afraid of seeing her nipples bleeding" [13].

This novel tells the story of Eguchi spending the nights with six beauties. From the attitude of Eguchi towards these beauties, we can understand Eguchi's aesthetic. The first girl he met here reminded him of his elopements and trysts with other women when he was young, but the second girl, he appeared to be rude, because the girl's heavy make-up and gorgeous appearance aroused his disgust. So Eguchi like pure, natural and young beauty. He was lost in thought once a time and began to worry about this woman's future life, "How will this girl spend her ever-changing life in the future? Suddenly, Eguchi was filled with worries similar to those of parents all over the world" [14], therefore, what Eguchi pursues is exactly a kind of pure and natural beauty. Moreover, he has the same affection for these beauties as their fathers.

### **The Meanings of the Beauty of Sleeping Beauties**

Then, what are the meanings of the beauty of sleeping beauties? From the analysis of the text, this paper believes that the beauty of sleeping beauties contains the meanings of youth and love at first. As said in the novel, "Some guests said that they had a beautiful dream after falling asleep. Others said that they remembered the past of their youth..... What is unexpected is not only the beauty of the girls, but also the youth of the girls". The old man Kiga once said to Eguchi: "only when the sleeping girl is around, they feel alive." "The young bodies of the girls awaken the dead hearts of the old men, and it seems that there is a sense of sadness" [15]. These beauties reminded the old people of their youth, awakened their dead hearts, and revitalized them. One of the features of the hotel's arrangements of young beauties to the old people is to awaken the young mind of the old people. Beauties symbolize young life, and the old people need the nourishment of young life. This is one of the reasons why they like to come here.

The beauties' youth itself represents life. This novel says, "For some of these old people, maybe that's life itself. Maybe that's life that can be touched with confidence" [16]. When Eguchi met the second girl sleeping with him, he saw the breath of life, the loveliness and activity of life on the girl, "The girl's arms reach the depth of Eguchi's eyes. They are the communication of life, the melody of life, the temptation of life, and the restoration of vitality for the old"[17]. When these beauties

was with him, Eguchi remembered that the first woman in his life is his mother, mother is the beginning of his life, he thought of the baby of his ex-girlfriend, “Tonight, Eguchi lay beside the sleeping girl, with white butterflies dancing in her eyes. Maybe the baby's white hat was at work” [18], “At this moment, Eguchi did smell the infant. Is this an instant illusion? He wondered: Why did this hallucination occur? He was puzzled. Maybe it's from the gap of emptiness that pops up suddenly in my mind. It smells like a baby feeding” [19]. The baby's birth odor emitted by the sleeping girl even reminded Eguchi of a geisha's disgust with the smell of baby on his body when he was young. These thoughts are about Eguchi's life experience. In a word, these sleeping beauties reminded Eguchi of his life and youth.

The beauty of sleeping beauties also contains the meaning of family affection. Eguchi has three daughters. The youngest daughter was married half a month after they enjoyed the flowers. After the daughter got married, the old man Eguchi felt lovely to see other young girls, “Eguchi touched the girl's hands, and the illusion of many flowers appeared deep in his eyes, then disappeared and reappeared. He let the illusion rise and fall, only to realize that the feelings of the past revived, that is, shortly after his daughter was married, he even felt lovely when he saw other people's daughters, and always keep in mind. Now he felt that the girl was just like one of the other daughters” [20]. At this moment, the illusion of the old man is caused by his missing to daughters. The above-mentioned “feeling” refers to the affection for his daughters. These sleeping beauties remind Eguchi of his daughters.

## **The Functions of Sleeping Beauties**

### **Freedom of Age for the Elderly**

The sleeping beauties remind Eguchi of his youth. The fragrance of these beauties' skin reminded the old man of the scene when the flowers are in full bloom in spring, and swept away the sadness and desolation in his heart, “The fragrance of the girl's skin penetrating into his eyes brings fresh and rich fantasies to Eguchi.....Under the high wall of Yamato Temple, two or three cold peony flowers blooming in the sunshine of indian summer, and white camellia flowers blooming in the courtyard around the edge of Shisen-do Hall. Now it is spring, in Tsubaki-dera Temple, Japanese andromeda's flowers and wisteria flowers are in full bloom, and scattered petals of Camellia flowers” [21]. At the end of this novel, Eguchi also thought of his dead mother, wife and honeymoon tour, life experience. These beauties who said nothing and could not hear anything are listeners to the old people like Eguchi, they comfort the old people's bodies and minds. This psychological need is the main purpose of coming to sleep in the house of beauties for them. These beauties satisfy the old people's needs for youth, life and beauty, but they are also victims. Their beauty is wrapped by the ugliness of the brothel, as mentioned in this novel, “However, for that the old people played with a victim – girl in lethargic sleep. Did they feel innocent and justified?” [22], sleeping beauties are accompanied by ugliness while providing beauty.

### **Comforters and Saviors for the Elderly**

The house of sleeping beauties can wash away the evil in those old men's life and provide a place for them to repent. As the novel says, “For the old people who quietly come to this house of sleeping beauties, they may not only regret the passing youth lonely, but also come to forget the sins they have done in their lives” [23], the old people who come here not only regret the passing of their youth, but also want to forget the bad things they have done in their lives. At the same time, this kind of confession is free and will not hurt the self-esteem of these old people, because the sleeping beauties will not wake up and they can confess their sins heartily, “The girl knew nothing about it and would never wake up. As a result, the elderly will not feel ashamed or hurt their self-esteem. It's totally free to regret, free to grieve” [24]. In a sense, beauties are also spiritual sustenance to the elderly, and are even considered to be the incarnations of God or Buddha, “Hopefully, by consoling and saving the old people in this hotel, she will be able to get happiness in the future. Eguchi even thought: Maybe, like the myths and legends of the past, the girl is the incarnation of Buddha” [25].

### **Filling in the Loneliness in the Hearts of the Old Men**

Eguchi has three daughters and they are all married. The sleeping beauties remind Eguchi of his relatives and the loneliness of the absence of children, “These flowers evoke memories of Eguchi 's three married daughters. He had taken three or one of his daughters to travel and enjoy flowers. The daughters who are now wives and mothers may not remember, but Eguchi remembers it very clearly. From time to time, he remembers and talks to his wife about flowers” [26], from these memories about his daughters, we can see the loneliness of Eguchi as a father. The terrible past of his daughter being contested by two young men and disgraced by one of them left Eguchi a feeling of pain and humiliation. “The ugliness of his daughter on that occasion suddenly appeared in Eguchi 's mind, and a strong sense of humiliation and shame came upon him” [27], for the sadness of his family, the sleeping beauty became the sustenance of the old man at night. The sleeping beauty reminded Eguchi of the scenes when his daughters and grandson were breastfeeding, “Not only did he remember his grandchildren's wet breasts, but also the past of holding his daughters while they were still nursing babies” [28], these past memories show the loneliness of the old man at that time. In addition, in a conversation between the woman and Eguchi, there are some words, “lonelier time than suicide” [29]. It shows how serious the loneliness of the old people who come to visit this hotel. In turn, it also shows that one of the functions of sleeping beauties is to fill the loneliness in the old people's hearts.

In conclusion, the functions of sleeping beauties are awakening the youth of the elderly, purifying the elderly's minds, becoming their spiritual sustenance, and filling the loneliness in their hearts.

### **Beauty and Ugliness**

The old man Eguchi is ugly in appearance and senile in age, he is in sharp contrast to these beauties' youth and beauty. As this novel says “At this point, he felt that he had entered the old ugly situation, not far from the sad situation of the old guests in this hotel. Coming here and see, it's this kind of omen that shows up” [30], Eguchi also knows his aging and ugliness. These beauties' beauty lies in their youth, their vitality and family feelings. They fill in the loneliness in the old men's hearts. They are the comforters and saviors for these old people. They bring the freedom of age to them. They are the listeners of the old people's lamentation. They remind the old people of their youth, their relatives and lives, so their beauty is not only in appearance. Although these old men's appearances are ugly compared with those of beauties, it can be seen from this novel that Eguchi has sympathy and compassion for these beauties, even similar to the love to his own children, so these old men like Eguchi also have something beautiful in their minds. Both these old men and the sleeping beauties have something beautiful on them.

What are the symbolic meanings of the taboos in this hotel? As said in the novel, “A surge of blood was inciting Eguchi to violence against the girl, breaking through the taboos of this hotel, revealing the ugly happiness of the elderly, and then saying goodbye to this place”[31], the main purpose of the old people coming to the house of sleeping beauties is to pursue youth and happiness. “saying good-bye to this place ” means farewell to youth. As a place to help the elderly regain their youth, if the elderly do not break through the taboos in this hotel, they can experience youth again and again until they die, and once they break through the taboos, they will have to say goodbye to youth and lose the chance to live quietly with youth and beauty. These old men's ageing, ugliness and young beauties' beauty are not in harmony. The hotel has reached such a balance: on the one hand, the sleeping beauties are pure, and this beauty continues, the old men cannot invade this beauty, on the other hand, those old men feel young, vigorous around these beauties, they don't need to feel sorrow for their aging, the hotel has become a bridge between them.

So on the whole, both beauties and old people have something beautiful on them. Although this kind of behavior is ugly, it can't hide the beauty on both of them. Making young women accompany the old people in order to let them feel youth. This kind of behavior, though ugly itself, has become the link between beauty and ugliness.

## Life and Death

In the last part of this novel, there are descriptions about life and death. One of the old men called Fukuyoshi accidentally died of angina pectoris near a sleeping girl. And the last girl who spent the night with Eguchi stopped breathing when he woke up. What does these plots about life and death mean? In the middle part of this novel, there is such a detail that Eguchi hopes to take the same medicine like those beauties next time when he comes to this hotel, because he wanted to sleep like "dead man" beside the beauties, "Eguchi planned to ask the woman to try the same medicine as the girl took next time he comes. Maybe she won't provide, but if she does, what will happen if I fall asleep like a dead man? The old man felt it was a temptation to fall asleep like a dead man beside sleeping beauties" [32]. What does death mean here? What does the death of an old man in front of a sleeping girl symbolize? Every old man is accompanied by death, and they are not far away from death. What does death mean to these old people? At the end of this novel, there is a dialogue between the woman and Eguchi.

"Sir, the ghost may appear tonight."

"I want to have a heart-to-heart talk with the ghost."

"What would you like to talk about?"

"The problem of poor old men." [33]

This reveals one of the themes of this novel: the problem of old age. What Eguchi hopes to talk with the "ghost" is also about old age. As an old man who comes here to spend nights with beautiful beauties, they are not far away from death. Death is realistic and ugly. All the old people here may be full of sorrow and sigh for their ageing. As mentioned in the novel, "Eguchi is depressed, and the dark nihility expands in his heart". The nihility here is the helplessness in the face of ageing. Old Fukuyoshi struggled when he was approaching the end at that night, he grabbed many scratches on the neck of the sleeping beauty. This kind of hospice is sad. Sleeping beauties bring pleasure to the elderly and sweep away their loneliness, and all the old people, including Eguchi, feel that it is a kind of happiness to die beside these beauties. This kind of yearning is actually the common aspiration of the elderly, as mentioned in this novel, "The old man died beside the naked girl. I'm afraid the newspaper won't be exposed. If I were the old man, I would like to stay there instead of being moved out. I think it would be happier" [34]. These beauties symbolize youth, vitality and beauty, the old men's desire actually reflects the ultimate pursuit of life and beauty. To die beside a girl is the destination that these old men yearn for, and Eguchi's request is in line with this hope, "My blood pressure and heart are normal. Don't worry. But in case of an accident, please don't take me to the Hot Spring Hotel and let me lie beside the girl, will you?" [35]. But the reality is cruel after all. After the sudden death of the elderly, the woman will relentlessly drag the elderly away immediately. Eguchi's request was refused, those sleeping beauties will not know the deaths of the elderly, as the novel says, "After the old man died, I wonder how long it took for the sleeping girl to lean her warm body against the cold body. The corpse was carried out, and the girl knew nothing about it" [36].

The beauties symbolize beauty and youth, these old men symbolize ugliness and death, beauty and ugliness, life and death are antagonistic here. But they are also interrelated. As mentioned in the novel, "The death of an old man is always ugly. But it may be a paradise near happiness". Dying in front of beautiful things like beauties may really be a kind of happiness for the old people. Therefore, although the old people know their ugliness, they have the hearts of pursuing life and beauty till death.

## Conclusion

Through the analyses of the original text of this novel, we can see that the theme of this novel is the opposition and connection between beauty and ugliness, life and death. The woman, sleeping beauties, old men and the hotel play different roles in this novel. The woman is cruel and ruthless. These beauties are the comforters and saviors for the old people. They can wake up the old people's aging hearts and fill the loneliness in their hearts. They are not only beautiful in appearance, but

also in the vitality of life. These old people get youth, beauty and happiness from them. The hotel is the way for the old people to find youth and a bridge between beauty and ugliness.

About the opposition and connection between beauty and ugliness, life and death, the old people's aging and this kind of behavior are undoubtedly ugly, but they have beautiful hearts, the young and beautiful beauties, awakening the young hearts of the old people, reminding them of their family, are the listeners and comforters for them, so they also have something beautiful on them. Beauty and ugliness are antagonistic and connected in this hotel. On the issue of life and death, beauties symbolize life, and the old people symbolize aging and death. They are opposite. But at the same time, life and death are also interrelated here. This hotel is the link between them. These old people yearn for life and beauty through sleeping beauties. They are not separated. Through such a special setting, the novel discusses the problem of old age and expresses a kind of aesthetic and life-death view. Beauty and ugliness, life and death can coexist, and they can be interrelated.

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