

(This essay analyzes Robert Ji-Song Ku's short story "Leda.")

The Function of Greek Mythology and *The Bridge of Dreams* in the Character of Sorin

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In Robert Ji-Song Ku's short story "Leda," the main character, Sorin, leads a life of imitation. He applies himself to his graduate studies in comparative literature a little too readily: he compares not just text to text; he also compares his life to text, to "works of literature" (Wong 281). If his life does not match that of at least one literary character on several levels of interpretation, whether emotional, physical, or mental, he changes his behavior so that it will. For example, he begins to "smoke and drink—heavily...simply because every one of Hemingway's heroes did it. For awhile I drank only vodka martinis in public because I read that James Bond drank it exclusively ... I ... also smoked [his] particular brand of cigarettes" (280). In "Leda," the two influential "oeuvres" (280) are Junichiro Tanizaki's *The Bridge of Dreams*, a "haunting retelling of the Oedipal myth" (281), and the story of Leda, in Greek mythology. Both have extensive influence on Sorin, and their influences intertwine in his behavior to the extent that it is difficult to separate and identify each.

"Leda" is primarily an Oedipal tale thanks to the influence of *Bridge*, but, as Sorin "frequently finds himself doing things, saying things, and make certain choices [because] ... some of the most intriguing characters in books have done the same," he mixes Oedipus with Zeus, Castor and Pollux to produce the character he becomes when interacting with Leda, his lover. Oedipus, of course, is the Greek dramatic character who, when he discovers he has married his mother and has had children with her, gouges his eyes out. Zeus is the philandering Greek father of the gods who, according to Greek legend, pursues the beautiful Leda, queen of Sparta. Unable to win her love, despite his perseverance, Zeus decides to transform himself into a swan in hopes of persuading Leda. It works; she falls in love with the swan, and Zeus seduces her. There are various versions about the number of children that result and the ways in which they come about; however, in the prevailing myth Leda produces two eggs. The first contains Castor and Pollux—Pollux is immortal, but Castor, his fraternal twin, is not—and the second contains Helen of Troy. The writers of *Microsoft Encarta Online* remark that "the twins were inseparable in their adventures, and when Castor died, Zeus made him immortal like Pollux. They then spent half their time in the underworld and half with the gods on Mount Olympus. According to legend, Zeus transformed the brothers into the constellation Gemini (The Twins)" ("Castor and Polydeuces").

As Sorin introduces himself to the reader in the beginning of the story, he is himself—or as close to being Sorin as he can. He cannot identify himself apart from fictional characters, and so the very first thing he says is "I have developed, over the years, a condition ..." (Wong 180), and he goes on to describe this state of existence. It is one in which he has "come to believe that [he] is, in rather a salient fashion, a fictional character, and that [his] life (or [his] reality) is just another book, a *work of literature*" (281). He justifies or explains this by saying "it was simply important to me that the choices I made in my life (or 'in my book') contained multiple levels of referentiality to 'other' works of literature, whether directly or indirectly, for better or worse" (Wong 281). As a result of this need for "multiple levels" (physical, emotional, mental) from

other works and the need to be a “fictional character,” Sorin views himself as a father/lover/son to Leda, saying “while Leda suckled me by night, I toiled as a graduate student in comparative literature by day” (284). He summarizes his lifestyle of imitation and crux of the story in this line: “It is a story, I would like to believe, not unlike the story of Leda, the woman from Cheju Island, and me” (281). In this statement he addresses each major issue of the story: the mythological figure Leda and all the symbolic elements--Zeus, Castor and Pollux, and the swan, among others--she brings to the story; his lover, Leda, the woman from Cheju Island, and all the roles she plays; and himself, who embodies so many characters, roles, and elements of the story.

Though Sorin’s father/son/lover character is fairly consistent throughout the story, various aspects of his persona are displayed at different points. These aspects can be divided into three main categories: Zeus the lover, Oedipus the son/lover (and thus Zeus, and Castor and Pollux, the sons, combined); and Zeus the father. Most often he is Oedipus, the son/lover.

When Sorin is playing Zeus the lover, he is purely a womanizer, driven by his sexual desire. His actions as Zeus the lover mirror the mythological story of Zeus and Leda. He is first attracted by her: the god Zeus was attracted by what he did not have, just as Sorin is attracted by what he does not have; the mythical Leda was a beautiful mortal, and Sorin draws a parallel between the two by saying that his Leda, “the woman without whom I cannot live, was merely from Cheju Island” (281). Secondly, he pursues her: as Zeus pursues Leda but cannot attract her, Sorin pursues his Leda but is unsure of how to attract her. Just like Zeus, he tries a seductive, mysterious approach, saying “Although I was afraid to do so, I approached her anyway . . . [*The Bridge of Dreams*] changed my life,’ I whispered to her”(Wong 283). As Zeus persuades Leda to make love with him, so Sorin persuades his Leda: “She spoke her first Korean word to me that night as I cupped her breasts in my hands and pressed my lips to her open mouth” (285).

In the pivotal fountain scene, Sorin moves from Zeus the lover to Oedipus the son/lover. He describes a dream--in which he is a peripheral observer until the end--he has involving Leda, a fountain, and a two-toned conch shell. Both the fountain and the conch shell are symbols of fertility. As if Zeus the lover and Leda are creating Oedipus the son/lover, Leda undergoes a sexual experience with the fountain and emerges holding a red-and-blue conch shell. The shell represents Oedipus the son/lover, the offspring of Leda and the fountain, and the existence of two colors with this single shell symbolizes the duality of the son/lover. In the end, Sorin, no longer the outside observer, places the conch shell at their feet and begins to make love to her, while Leda croons a mother’s refrain to him: “Go to sleep, Sorin, go to sleep” (282). When he tells Leda about the dream, he “suddenly want[s] to cry [at her response], knowing that [he] is but a little boy with her (although [he] is five years older than she) but [he] resist[s] because [he] is happy” (284).

Though at times Sorin is strictly a lover, he most often plays Oedipus the son/lover. Describing one night he spends with Leda, Sorin says, “As I suckled on [her] breast ... it ... did not matter that I tasted no milk. There, however, was the sweet, undeniable taste of salt on her skin” (283). Leda is both mother and lover to Sorin: as a son, he nurses from her breast, and as a lover, he “undeniabl[y]” tastes the salt on her skin. Salt is produced by sweat, and if Leda were sweating during their time together it would mean that they had been having sex. Leda encourages this son/love combination by inviting Sorin time and again to nurse at her breast. When he tells her the name his mother gave him, Leda replies, “Like your mother, I, too, from this moment on, will call you Sorin, my child” (Wong 284). When she reads to him at night, she reads from *The Bridge of Dreams*. When he asks her to read more, she says, “No, my child. It is time to sleep. Fall asleep between my breasts” (284). Sorin responds to this, too, saying later,

“Leda ... I could never hurt you, just as I could never hurt my mother” (285). At times his filial responses become involuntary and habitual: “I found myself staring at Leda’s breasts without realizing what I was doing” (285), and “I literally slept like a baby every night between Leda’s bosom” (286).

The final character that Sorin plays is Zeus the father. The last passage in section IX describes the only time that Sorin recognizes taking on this role, and the disastrous consequences when he tries to verbalize the parts he and Leda have been playing:

“I have, over the past three weeks, become like your son. You have nourished me with the milk from your breasts. The spirit that has been with your mother--and is now with you--is the spirit of your father. I have realized, very recently, that I am the reincarnate of your father. I knew this when I first met your mother; I knew that I had loved her very deeply very long ago, just as I love you now. I am your son. Please, Leda, let me suckle from your breast.” With these words, I sought out one of her nipples, hungrily, and my tongue quickly recovered its old skills. Liquid flowed freely from her breasts. But the taste was not sweet. It was salty, like blood.
(287)

When Sorin states concisely and clearly the twisted games he and Leda had been playing, and when he says “I am your father,” “I am your son,” “I loved your mother,” and “I love you now” in nearly the same breath, it cuts Leda to the quick. The intertwining of the family ties held so dear by Leda--the mother she is so proud of and so quick to defend, and the father she can barely remember--shreds the persona she had tried to adopt, and her ability to act this part is shattered. She “ask[s] [Sorin] to leave her life, and ... she refuses to see [him] or speak to [him]” (Wong 27). When Sorin suckles one last time, it is as if she is both crying and bleeding.

When their beyond-normal role-playing was something tacitly understood, both Sorin and Leda were able to extract some sort of comfort or feeling of importance from their lives. Sorin, however, destroys any semblance of normalcy that either has been able to find. By playing these characters and by not being able to find any significance in himself, Sorin tears apart two lives; however, he learns nothing from any of these experiences. To conclude the story, he says, “I have never before known so much pain. I cannot imagine feeling more grief than this very moment. Perhaps I will know this kind of pain again when my mother passes away” (287). Unlike Leda, who “asked [Sorin] to leave her life” and who has found “someone she cares greatly about” (287), Sorin is still playing a part. Perhaps Leda is, too; perhaps she has a similar relationship with this new person, and refuses to see Sorin because he has the gall to vocalize their actions and the new person does not. In any case, Sorin is certainly none the wiser for having lived his life vicariously.

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