

# Natsume Sōseki and Modern Japanese Literature

By Marvin Marcus

Natsume Sōseki (1867–1916) is one of a handful of individuals who both symbolized Japan's emergence as a modern nation and helped mold an understanding of the modern condition through his life's work. Literature was Sōseki's creative vehicle, but his significance in the context of a broader national identity is greater than the sum of his individual works. In short, his stature is akin to that of Mark Twain, a consensus American icon.

Born at the end of Japan's final shogunal epoch, the Tokugawa period (1603–1868), Sōseki died several years following the death of the Meiji Emperor. His life span essentially overlaps the seminal Meiji period in Japan's history (1868–1912), and his literature has long been regarded as having captured the so-called *Meiji no seishin*—the spirit of the Meiji Era. Sōseki's official status as a Japanese cultural property was acknowledged in the form of his image, which long adorned the nation's thousand-yen banknote.

## Backdrop

Natsume Sōseki's life and writings were indelibly marked by the intersection of late Tokugawa influences and the ambitious modernization project that marked the Meiji period. The Tokugawa shogunate, based in Edo, had succeeded in maintaining an orderly and regimented society through the imposition of a Confucian-style social hierarchy, with the *bushi* (samurai) class at the top. Rival samurai clans were effectively marginalized, and the threat of Western colonial incursions was countered through the shogunal *sakoku* policy of national isolation, which effectively cordoned off the nation from most foreign influences for over two centuries. Tokugawa society was subject to an official moral code that stressed duty and obedience, and its leaders instituted a relatively strict regime of edicts, regulations, and widespread censorship in order to ensure social order.

Thanks to the stable society and a productive domestic economy, Tokugawa cities—especially the shogunal capital of Edo and the mercantile center of Osaka—expanded dramatically, and *chōnin* (an ascendant merchant class) fostered a stunning variety of arts and entertainment. An urban-based secular culture prevailed, and the pleasure quarters, with their *geisha* houses, stylish restaurants, and kabuki theaters, attracted anyone with money to burn.

Sōseki's Japan bore the marks of the nation's rapid transition to modernity, a major catalyst for which was the arrival of a fleet of American *kurofune* ("Black Ships") in 1853, under the command of Matthew Perry. Fifteen years later, the shogunal order gave way to the Meiji Era and the advent of modern Japan. Sōseki was witness to the daunting challenges involved in this radical transformation, and his literature, in the aggregate, is both a reflection of and commentary on the new social, political, and cultural order.



Natsume Sōseki. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <http://tinyurl.com/oar75wo>.

The Meiji mission was to create a modern nation with state-of-the-art education, technology, media, and urban development. Tokyo—the erstwhile Tokugawa shogunal capital—would be a showcase of Japanese modernity and the center of the nation's cultural and intellectual life. Western know-how would be privileged, together with a new social and political agenda that recognized individualism, autonomy, and equality.

Yet these modern developments had to contend with a significant conservative agenda adopted by the powerful Meiji oligarchs—themselves erstwhile samurai. Cognizant of the need to leverage Tokugawa nativist teachings as a hedge against Western hegemony, they restored the emperor as a national sovereign, patriarch, and Shinto divinity. And they promulgated a "uniqueness myth" centered on *kokutai*, a term meant to invoke a credo of Japanese uniqueness. Harkening back to Japan's authoritarian past, the nation's leaders sought to mold a people attuned to their status as loyal subjects of the emperor. In short, Meiji Japan witnessed the confrontation of a resurgent traditionalism, and the new ethic of individualism and freedom inspired by Western models.

This seemingly incongruous design in the fabric of Meiji society would inevitably be reflected in the work of its writers and intellectuals—none more so than Natsume Sōseki.

## Sōseki's Early Years

Natsume Kinnosuke (Sōseki is a pen name) was born in Edo in 1867, one year before the city would be renamed Tokyo with the advent of the Meiji period. The Natsume family had long since lost its samurai status, and Kinnosuke's father served as a local official of no particular significance. The sixth and last child of older parents who felt the burden of an essentially unwanted child, Kinnosuke was sent out for adoption as an infant to a couple of their acquaintance, the Shiobaras—a not-uncommon practice. The lad would spend some eight years with his adoptive parents, who had serious marital problems of their own, and finally returned to his natal home when he was eight. These early experiences, with their complex emotional freight, would figure in much of his subsequent literature.

The young Kinnosuke was a brilliant student with a flair for literature—the legacy of Japanese and Chinese writings initially, then English literature. As a graduate of Tokyo Imperial University, he took on several rural teaching posts in Shikoku and Kyūshū—experiences that would inspire one of his most popular novels. In 1896, at age twenty-nine, he married Nakane Kyōko, who was ten years younger. She would bear him six children, and they remained together despite temperamental differences and a troubled relationship. Marital problems and mutual barriers to communication would emerge as a key theme of Sōseki's late novels.

In 1900, Sōseki was sent to England at government expense to study English literature at its source. He spent two years in London, a bitterly

trying time notwithstanding his far-ranging literary studies. Two serious impediments would come into play here: a chronic stomach disorder that went untreated and led to a series of hospitalizations and an early death at age forty-nine, and a neurotic disorder diagnosed as *shinkei suijaku*—neurasthenia—treated by early Japanese specialists in clinical psychology. The neurasthenia symptoms, including seemingly erratic behavior and unusual mood swings, essentially signaled that Sōseki was at risk of a nervous breakdown.

Perhaps a reflection of his melancholic temperament, Sōseki embraced a sardonic, occasionally fatalistic view of modern society and the human condition itself. His keen sensitivity to the problems and pitfalls of social relationships—especially in the context of marriage and family—and the corrosive impact of egocentrism, false pride, and mistrust would deeply color his best-known novels.

### Sōseki's Literary Achievements

As with many of his literary contemporaries, poetry was an early passion and a lifelong pursuit. Sōseki would achieve mastery in both the haiku genre—recalling great predecessors such as Bashō and Buson—and the Chinese poetic genre known as *kanshi*. Indeed, his stature as a poet would alone have established him as a major literary figure. But together with his great contemporary Mori Ōgai (1862–1922), Sōseki went on to distinguish himself across the spectrum of literary production. Fiction, though, would be his enduring legacy.

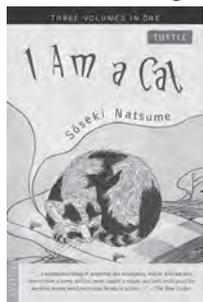
Having been appointed to a prestigious professorship in English Literature at the Imperial University in Tokyo, Sōseki found himself more interested in creative writing than what had become an increasingly stultifying academic routine. While still teaching, he achieved critical acclaim for a novel improbably titled *I Am a Cat* and even more accolades for a second novel, *Botchan*, whose spirited young protagonist was widely admired. By now committed to a literary career, Sōseki resigned from his university position—all but unthinkable at the time—and embarked on what would be a ten-year career as a professional fiction writer on the staff of the *Asahi shimbun*, one of the nation's leading newspapers. He published a series of novels, which initially appeared in daily serialization, over the course of a decade. As such, his work became part of the daily reading diet of millions of Japanese.

Once established in the *bundan*, the Tokyo-based literary community, Sōseki attracted a number of protégés and disciples, and they would meet regularly on Thursdays at the Natsume home near Waseda University—a gathering known as the *Mokuyōkai*, the “Thursday Group.” It has since become the stuff of literary legend. Sōseki's extensive personal writings include many anecdotes and episodes set within his circle of literary colleagues and protégés.<sup>1</sup>

### Major Works

Sōseki's novels have earned a privileged place in the Japanese literary canon, and they have enjoyed an “afterlife” in various media forms—film, anime, television drama, and so forth. A brief overview of the major works will reveal the trajectory of a literary career that led to the author being regarded as something akin to Japan's unofficial “novelist-laureate.”

#### *I Am a Cat* (*Wagahai wa neko de aru*, 1905–1906)



Sōseki's first novel, a masterpiece of satire inspired in part by British literary forerunners, is set in the household of one “Professor Sneeze” and is narrated by the family's all-knowing and wryly sardonic cat. The nameless feline harbors a distinctly misanthropic attitude as it lampoons the vanity, pomposity, and general cluelessness of its master.

Insofar as Sneeze's peccadilloes clearly match those of the author, the work is a self-parody. But it also gives ample voice to Sōseki's jaundiced view of

modern civilization, as well as lampoons the patriotic fervor that was then sweeping the nation as it waged its war with Russia. The novel was a great success, and the author, now intent on pursuing fiction writing in earnest, immediately turned to his next literary project.

#### *Botchan* (1906)



Written while the author still occupied his university teaching post, Sōseki's second novel drew upon his personal experiences as a teacher in provincial Shikoku. *Botchan* is the first-person account of a young man raised by unloving parents who regarded him as wild and willful; it is only his devoted maid, Kiyo, who sees the good in him. The novel's title refers to the name, roughly equivalent to “sonny boy,” that Kiyo affectionately called him.

The rather naïve young man leaves Tokyo following his parents' death and takes up a teaching post in the provinces. What ensues is his education in the ways of the world—encounters with crass and duplicitous individuals whose chicanery he cannot endure and whom he resolves to unmask so that justice can be done.

*Botchan* has long held a privileged place among Japanese readers, largely due to its endearing portrayal of the utterly guileless, principled, and intrepid young protagonist who cannot sit idly by without confronting wrongdoers in positions of authority.

Still a relatively inexperienced writer, Sōseki would move on to experiment with fictional genres and themes. For instance, his next novel, *The Three-Cornered World* (Kusamakura, 1907), is a seeming retreat into a world of aesthetic self-indulgence abounding in lyrical flights, meditations on beauty, and haiku-esque sensibility. Yet here the author poses a challenge to the then-dominant naturalist coterie, whose agenda of unadorned confessional angst and self-pity he rejected. At the same time, Sōseki points to the value of a cultural traditionalism threatened by the juggernaut of modern civilization.

By this point, Sōseki had finally resigned his professorial post and entered the employ of the *Asahi shimbun* as a professional novelist. His work, which would henceforth appear in daily serialization, essentially established a literary standard for the nation.

### A Trilogy of Novels

Following this early phase of his career, Sōseki can be said to have matured as a writer with the appearance of a trilogy written between 1908 and 1911. The first of these, *Sanshirō* (1908), concerns an eager but naïve young man from the provinces, Ogawa Sanshirō, and his experiences as a student at Tokyo University. Reminiscent of *Botchan*'s awakening to the harsh realities of life, *Sanshirō*, who is initially overwhelmed by the clash and clatter of the big city, gradually learns from his mentors at the university. They in turn serve as a comic send-up of academic pretense and puffery—a target of Sōseki's first novel. Sadly, *Sanshirō*'s infatuation with Mineko, the very model of modern, independent Japanese womanhood, will bear no fruit. Notwithstanding his elite university training, the young man has yet to “graduate” into the sort of adult who can function in a competitive and unforgiving world. However, it is precisely his innocent and guileless nature that has helped make *Sanshirō*, together with *Botchan*, such perennial favorites among Japanese readers.

Essentially a sequel to *Sanshirō*, *And Then* (*Sore kara*, 1909) centers on a savvy, somewhat world-weary protagonist, Daisuke, who is in effect a version of *Sanshirō* as a jaded adult. Daisuke is well-off, smug, and entirely self-absorbed. The novel, eschewing an objective view of Daisuke's circumstance, instead presents a sustained view of his inner world, and in so doing achieves a remarkable degree of psychological plausibility. Like *Sanshirō*, Daisuke is romantically attracted to someone unattainable—Michiyo, the

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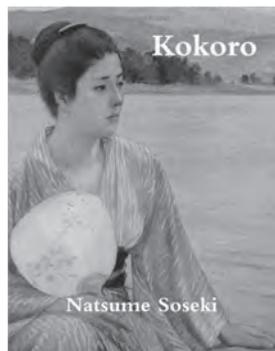
wife of his best friend. The novel traces his inner rationalizations and compulsions, and ends with the clever but ineffectual protagonist locked in his private world and on the verge of madness—a victim of the alienating forces of modern society and lacking the means of engaging others or escaping his nightmarish reality.

The final novel of Sōseki's trilogy, *The Gate* (*Mon*, 1911), tells of another troubled Tokyoite. Unlike Daisuke, though, Sōsuke has a dead-end job and an unhappy marriage to a woman—Oyone—whom he stole away from a friend. Beset by financial problems and at his wits' end, Sōsuke looks to religion as a means of escape. Intent upon achieving peace of mind through meditation, he goes to a monastery in Kamakura and immerses himself in Zen practice. But Sōsuke is sadly misguided and finds himself back where he started. His personal dilemma, emblematic of the human condition as understood by the author, is movingly captured in the following passage:

*[Sōsuke] looked at the great gate which would never open for him. He was never meant to pass through it. Nor was he meant to be content until he was allowed to do so. He was, then, one of those unfortunate beings who must stand by the gate, unable to move, and patiently wait for the day to end.*<sup>3</sup>

Some years earlier, Sōseki had himself struggled with Zen meditation before abandoning it in frustration—an experience that left him with a deep cynicism regarding religiosity and ritual practice. His literary alter egos would have no recourse other than to endure their lot or opt for the only escape within their power—suicide. The two novels that mark the culmination of Sōseki's singular career—*Kokoro* and *Grass on the Wayside*—explore the world of characters faced with challenges that eventuate in first one, then the other option. *Kokoro* in particular has been acclaimed as the great Japanese novel.

### *Kokoro* (1914)



The title, left in the original in the novel's fine English translation, is the Japanese term for heart, spirit, our innermost feelings—in other words, that which makes us most identifiably human. In the hands of Sōseki, *kokoro* is also a challenge, a riddle. Reflecting back upon the recently ended Meiji period and the problematic modernity that it produced, the author captures the complex interplay of self-obsession and our need for others through his two protagonists. One, a university student and the novel's main narrator, befriends a some-

what-older person he meets by chance. Referred to only as Sensei—an honorific term connoting both age and wisdom—the older friend proves strangely and enticingly aloof, refusing to answer his many probing questions. Guarding his privacy, Sensei admonishes the friend in a passage laden with ominous overtones:

*Don't put too much trust in me. You will learn to regret it if you do . . . I bear with my loneliness now, in order to avoid greater loneliness in the years ahead. You see, loneliness is the price we have to pay for being born in this modern age, so full of freedom, independence, and our own egotistical selves.*<sup>4</sup>

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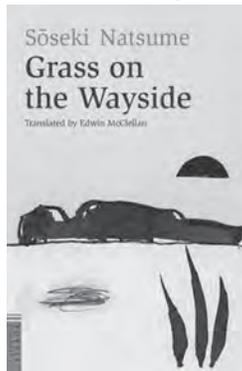
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This cautionary pronouncement only serves to reinforce the bond with the enigmatic Sensei, who has come to assume the status of surrogate father. At long last, Sensei does indeed relate his life story. But it is presented in the form of an extended suicide note, delivered to the friend at the moment when his own father was facing imminent death. He abandons the dying father and his family in the provinces and rushes back to Tokyo. On board the train, he (and the novel's readers) can finally learn of Sensei's past.

The document, which comprises half the novel, amounts to a confessional autobiography that tells a tragic tale of self-deception, emotional paralysis, betrayal, and unremitting guilt. Haunted by the consequences of the betrayal, which cost his close friend K his life, and unable to confide in his wife, who had unwittingly played a role in K's death, Sensei has for years been locked in a prison of his own making. The younger friend thus serves as the catalyst for him to emerge from his cell and tell his story, whereupon he is able to take his own life by way of atonement. The novel ends at the point where the letter ends. As for the fate of the young friend and Sensei's widow—the novel's two survivors—Sōseki allows us to draw our own conclusions.

The resonance of Sensei's suicide with that of General Nogi, the heroic military figure who committed ritual suicide on the day of Emperor Meiji's state funeral in September 1912, underscores the sense in which this extraordinarily moving novel has been said to capture something at the heart—the *kokoro*—of Meiji Japan, and by extension, the modern condition itself.

#### **Grass on the Wayside (Michikusa, 1915)**



Sōseki's last complete novel, *Grass on the Wayside*, is also the most clearly autobiographical.<sup>5</sup> Modeled upon the Natsume household following the author's return from London, it presents a family drama that revisits the "signature" themes of self-absorption, complacency, and failed communication. The married couple—Kenzō and Osumi—inhabit a contested domestic terrain that pits them against one another, with the inevitable harvest of wounded pride and mutual exasperation. Theirs is an emotional tug-of-war that captures the uneasy "terms of engagement" emblematic of a modern marriage.

The novel is channeled principally through the husband, Kenzō—a conceited, cranky intellectual who is prone to melancholy reflections on his past. He is beset by haunting memories of childhood in an adoptive family and has recently been badgered by the adoptive father for a cash settlement in exchange for an annulment of the adoption. Worse yet, he is saddled with a wife who simply cannot understand him. Kenzō does harbor a certain affection for his wife but remains entirely incapable of expressing it. For her part, Osumi is driven to distraction by her blowhard of a husband, wishing that he would let down his guard for once and treat her with some kindness.

*Grass on the Wayside* concludes with one final sparring match, which concerns the agreed-upon payoff intended to settle things with the adoptive father.

"What a relief," [Osumi] said. "At least the affair is finally settled . . ."

"But it isn't, you know."

"What do you mean?" . . .

"Hardly anything in life is settled. Things that happen once will go on happening . . ." He spoke bitterly, almost with venom.

His wife gave no answer. She picked up the baby and kissed its red cheeks.

"Nice baby, nice baby. We don't know what daddy is talking about, do we?"<sup>6</sup>

#### **The Sōseki Legacy**

Natsume Sōseki's fiction can be said to mark the coming-of-age of modern Japanese literature, from its origins in the early 1880s. The author achieved a mastery of the modern psychological novel, through which he succeeded in capturing the ebb and flow of moods, conflicted emotions, and confusion that marked his own life and that of his literary alter egos. With remarkable sensitivity and subtlety, Sōseki's literature explores the travails of individualism in the modern age. Insulated from others by circumstance and personal inclination, his characters ponder the meaning of their lives, wondering who they are and how they got to be that way. They mull over the past and sift through the traces and fragments of memory for something that might yield an answer. And they struggle—often in vain—to make sense of relationships freighted with pain, regret, and a numbing banality.

But there is more to the story—namely, a Sōseki legend that has survived his passing, one that plays upon an essential wisdom attributed to the man and his work. At its core is an epigram with which the author is closely associated—*sokuten kyoshi*, "Be in accord with heaven and reject the self." Like many such legends, the exact source is unclear, as is the sense in which Sōseki may have meant for it to be understood. Yet generations of disciples and admirers have maintained that the man embodied a higher wisdom. It is either ironic or entirely fitting that an individual so sensitive to the corrosive forces at work in modern society, and so skeptical about the future, should emerge as a sage.

I would like to think that Sōseki's bemused expression on the iconic photograph represents his response to this curious state of affairs. ■

#### **NATSUME SŌSEKI'S MAJOR NOVELS**

*I Am a Cat*. Translated by Aiko Itō and Graeme Wilson. Rutland, Vermont; Tokyo, Japan: Charles E. Tuttle Company., 1986.

*Botchan*. Translated by Joel Cohn. Tokyo: Kodansha International, 2007.

*The Three-Cornered World*. Translated by Alan Turney. London: Peter Owen, 1965.

*Sanshirō*. Translated by Jay Rubin. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1977.

*And Then*. Translated by Norma Moore Field. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978.

*The Gate*. Translated by Francis Mathy. London: Peter Owen, 1972.

*Kokoro*. Translated by Edwin McClellan. Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1957.

*Grass on the Wayside*. Translated by Edwin McClellan. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969.

#### **NOTES**

1. For a study of this body of writing, see my *Reflections in a Glass Door: Memory and Melancholy in the Personal Writings of Natsume Sōseki* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010).
2. See the appended listing of the novels and their respective English translations.
3. Cited in Jay Rubin, "Sōseki," *Modern Japanese Writers*, ed. Jay Rubin (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2001), 372. The passage was translated by Edwin McClellan. Rubin's essay (349–384) provides a detailed and astute commentary on the author's work. Here I would like to acknowledge Jay Rubin's important contributions as a Sōseki scholar and translator.
4. Edwin McClellan, trans., *Kokoro* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1957), 30.
5. A final novel, *Light and Darkness (Meian)*, was left incomplete at the time of Sōseki's death on December 9, 1916.
6. Based upon Edwin McClellan, trans., *Grass on the Wayside* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 168–169.

MARVIN MARCUS is Professor of Japanese Language and Literature at Washington University in St. Louis, where he has taught since 1985. He did his graduate work in Japanese literature at the University of Michigan, where he earned an MA and PhD. Marcus's area of specialization is modern Japanese literature of the *kindai* (prewar) period. He has extensively researched and written on authors such as Mori Ōgai, Natsume Sōseki, Shimazaki Tōson, Futabatei Shimei, and Uchida Roan.