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.

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 autoritarian 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 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
try time notwithstanding his far-ranging literary studies. Two serious impediments would come into play here: a chronic stomach disorder that swept 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
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.

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.3

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 somewhat 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.4

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*From Vol. 48, Nos. 1 & 2*
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 aban-
dons 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—Sensei 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. 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 his best 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 Konan’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.

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“Nice baby, nice baby. We don’t know what daddy is talking about, do we?”


“"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?”

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 Hawaii Press, 2010).

2. See the appended listing of the novels and their respective English translations.


5. A final novel, Light and Darkness (Meien), was left incomplete at the time of Sōseki’s death on December 9, 1916.