

**Struggles During Times of Great Change:**

**Natsume Soseki's Struggle to Seek Identity in "Dream of the Seventh Night"**

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As a writer who is born and raised during the Meiji period, similar to Lu Xun, Natsume Soseki also witnesses his home country undergoes drastic changes in attempt to modernize and westernize itself. During this period known as Meiji Restoration, Japan embraces western cultures and idea that are fundamentally different from the traditional cultures of Japan. Due to this, Natsume Soseki is not only a great writer in Japanese, but he is also a scholar in English. However, as good as it may sounds, it is not necessarily a blessing. Also similar to Lu Xun, the country and the culture that was once familiar and dear to Natsume is no longer the same as it was. The conflict causes him to question the cultural identity of his country and the identity of himself. In the “Dream of the Seventh Night,” Natsume Soseki portrays his struggle in searching for both Japan’s cultural identity and his own identity as Japanese.

The first thing that Natsume Soseki introduces to the readers in the “Dream of the Seventh Night” is a big ship. Note that it is a ship that is “emitting black smoke” (27, Natsume). From this detail, the readers could tell that it is not a traditional Japanese ship that sails by wind. Instead, the ship is a “black ship,” one of the symbols of the Meiji Restoration. Therefore, the ship represents Japan during the Meiji period, the vessel that carries Japanese people sailing to the West. Then “I” talk about a “sun” that sinks into water. In this case, the sun is a symbol of Japan as a nation, because historically, sun has been an important symbol of the Japanese culture and appeared frequently on the Japanese flag. As the sun sinks into water, it sputters the water around it, showing that the traditional culture and identity of Japan does not simply fades away, but instead is still causing a reaction among Japanese people. Natsume uses these metaphors to portray the struggles within him. Similar to how “the ship makes a terrible noise in a vain chase after the sun’s traces,” Natsume and many Japanese people also lament over the decay of

traditional Japanese culture (27, Natsume). Similar to the “Dream of the Sixth Night,” “Dream of the Seventh Night” also expresses “a nostalgia for a purer, richer past a past which is increasingly inaccessible to the modernizing Japan of Meiji Period” (Napier, 1).

Then “I” approaches a crewman, asks him if the ship is heading west. However, the crewman did not give a clear answer. Instead, the crewman expresses that he will serve the boat because the boat is where he belongs. Here, Natsume Soseki is drawing a contrast between himself and the majority who are promoting modernization to emphasize his loneliness and powerlessness to cause a change. Through the thoughts of “I,” Natsume expresses his lost. He has no idea about the future and what Japan will become. Natsume is intimidated by the changes going on around him yet he can’t do anything about it because rapid modernization is what the majority wants.

In the end of this paragraph, “I” begins to think about suicide, showing that Natsume is also attempting to seek refuge from escapism. Finally, “I” decide to kill himself. However, the moment he jumps from the deck he begins to regret it. He realizes that it would have been better to stay alive even if he has no knowledge nor control of the future of the ship. Natsume uses the death of “I” to remind himself and the readers that although it is a struggle to live during a time of drastic change, although one may be lost of his identity, death and escapism is not the remedy. Rather, people should stay on the “ship” even if the future is clouded.

### Works Cited

*Natsume, Sōseki, et al. Ten Nights' Dreams. Soseki Museum in London, 2000.*

Napier, Susan. *The Fantastic in Modern Japanese Literature The Subversion of Modernity.*  
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