

Hope Born Out of Despair:

Coexistence of Hope and Despair in Works of Lu Xun and Natsume Soseki

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Within their lifetime, both Natsume Soseki and Lu Xun witnessed their home country going through drastic changes in an attempt to modernize and Westernize itself. After watching these changes take place, both writers produced works that reflected their attitudes towards the changes themselves and their fellow people. In response to the Meiji Restoration, Natsume Soseki wrote *Ten Nights of Dream* in 1908. Similarly, Lu Xun wrote the poems of *Wild Grass* between the years of 1924 to 1926 in response to the end of the New Culture Movement. Both of these works are clouded by a sense of despair, which comes from the writers' crisis of consciousness. Both Natsume Soseki and Lu Xun felt powerless while going against the trend of their time. As mentioned in the Preface to *Call to Arms*, both of them are the few that are awake yet feel there's no hope of destroying the iron house (Lu Xun). However, despair is not all there is to Lu Xun and Natsume Soseki's work. In spite of the harsh reality that they were facing, neither writer chose to escape into the void of nihilism. Despite everything, there is still hope that is born out of the despair in their works. In "Hope" Lu Xun expresses his worries about the future of China and the numbness of Chinese youth towards national and cultural crisis, while at the same time discuss how to borne hope in the face of despair. In a similar fashion, "The Seventh Night" on the other hand, captures Natsume Soseki's worries about the future of Japan and the knee-jerking reaction of Japanese people towards Westernization, while at the same time tries to tell the reader why hope is better than despair.

A large portion of Natsume Soseki's despair comes from the cultural anxiety he has for traditional Japanese culture after the influence of Westernization during the Meiji Restoration. This sense of cultural anxiety is especially evident in "The Seventh Night." The story is told in a first-person perspective and the narrator can be viewed as Natsume Soseki himself. Throughout

the story, the narrator is troubled by the feeling of unease and unhappiness. These feelings largely come from the knee-jerk reaction that Japanese people had towards Westernization. In the story, the narrator hears the sailors sing: “My ship is my home and I ever roam,” showing that they are simply content with going whichever direction that the ship takes them (Soseki 28). In this case, the ship is a symbol representing Japan as a nation, while the sailors are referring to the Japanese people who were blindly following the trend of the time without thinking consciously about the possible consequences that Westernization may bring to traditional Japanese culture. This numbness and apathy of people towards traditional Japanese culture frustrated Natsume Soseki and made him feel powerless in front of the majority who could not wait to embrace Westernization. Being one of the few who see the potential harm of Westernization yet do not have the power to change anything brought Natsume Soseki despair. In the end of the story, the narrator also experiences a similar feeling and chooses to jump off of the ship and commits suicide.

From the poems in the collection *Wild Grass*, the reader could sense a similar type of despair from Lu Xun. In spite of its name, the poem “Hope” is filled with despair. Just like Natsume Soseki, the despair comes from a sense of loneliness and a sense of growing vulnerability against “the dark night of emptiness.” (Lu Xun 19) As mentioned by Chongke Zhu, for a long time, Lu Xun believed that the reform of China lies within the youth (Zhu 105). He hopes, through his writing, that the youth in China could be “enlightened” and not be numb towards the suffering of their own people. After the end of the New Culture Movement, Lu Xun began to question the work he did and whether or not it has brought about any positive change to the Chinese culture and Chinese people. Just like “The Seventh Night,” “Hope” is also told in

first-person narrative. The poem could also be viewed as a confession and self-reflection by Lu Xun himself. Through the narrator, Lu Xun describes how he “took this shield of hope to withstand the invasion of the dark night in the emptiness.” (Lu Xun 18) He hoped to use himself as an example to spread this kind of spirit of resilience, but what brings the narrator or Lu Xun despair is the discontinuation of such spirit in the young people. In the poem, Lu Xun questions, whether “the young people of the world have all grown old?”, showing his despair caused by the increasingly numb youth (Lu Xun 19). However, while the poem is filled with despair, it is also about fighting despair. As mentioned by Zhu, Lu Xun’s quote of Petofi is not to deny hope and lead youth to despair. Rather, Lu Xun is denying despair and encouraging people to achieve true hope through struggle (Zhu 114).

In a similar fashion, Natsume Soseki is also encouraging his readers to seek hope rather than despair. Immediately after abandoning the ship, the narrator regrets his decision. He realizes that it would have been better if he had stayed on the ship to see where the future would lead. Natsume Soseki is telling his readers through the self-reflection of the narrator that no matter how dark the future is, it cannot be darker than the water of death.

Works Cited

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