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| Natsume, Sōseki (1867-1916) |
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| Natsume Sōseki (b. Natsume Kinnosuke, generally referred to by his pen name Sōseki, adopted originally for signing his poetry) is commonly held to be the greatest modern Japanese novelist. An idiosyncratic man of letters, he was a path-breaking satirist and stylist, as well as a critic and scholar of English literature. Among the first Japanese writers to make a living solely by the sales of his own literary work, Sōseki occupied the ironic position of having become widely popular by writing about the extreme loneliness of the modern condition. His place in the Japanese canon has only grown since his death, with his works appearing in prominent positions in anthologies of modern literature and regularly listed in school curricula; his visage also appeared for decades on the 1000 yen note. |
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As a child, Sōseki had two homes; though his biological parents gave him over to foster care as an infant, he moved between the two houses as he grew up and wrote of having four parents and, alternatively, no parents. Excelling and, by all accounts, mastering Chinese studies at a young age, he turned to English literature at Tokyo University. His prowess as a linguist is attested to by his English language translation of the Japanese classic by Kamo no Chōmei *An Account of My Hut,* which was published while Sōseki was still a student and is still highly regarded. After graduation he taught in Ehime and Kumamoto prefectures, marrying Nakane Kyoko in 1896. This time teaching outside of Tokyo would provide the material both for satire and personal reflection.  After his stint teaching in the country, Sōseki spent two years in London as a government-sponsored student of the Shakespeare scholar William J. Craig. In later reflections, he would cast his London years as the dismal life of a lonely, meager graduate student encountering racism and discrimination for the first time. But those years were also formative, dedicated to developing a sociologically scientific view of literature outlined in his *Theory of Literature*. Upon his return to Tokyo, Sōseki succeeded Lafcadio Hearn as a lecturer at Tokyo University, where he introduced a new generation of Japanese intellectuals to various writers including Carlyle, Whitman, and Swift.  During these years lecturing, Sōseki began to write fiction to great success. Written in little over a week, *Little Master* (1906) caricatured the life of a teacher in Matsuyama by presenting a group of one-dimensional teachers with ethical failings. *I Am a Cat* (1905-6) presented an intellectual and haughty feline member of the Sneaze household to mock the social upheaval of domestic Meiji life. These novels were successes upon their publications and continue to be widely read today, but it was Sōseki’s controversial decision to give up his prestigious position teaching to take a job with the *Asahi News* that enabled him to make his lasting mark on Japanese literature.  Serializing a lengthy novel every year in the *Asahi* *News* from 1907-1914 gave Sōseki not only a commanding national venue, but also a regular deadline that would make those years the most productive of his life. Although the first of those lengthy serial novels was not Sōseki’s favorite, *Red Poppies* displayed much of what would become his motivating problematic, a conscious struggle to connect the incommensurable: tradition with the contemporary, Chinese literature with English literature, and the individual with society. The results made critics debate for years whether Sōseki was an enigmatic genius or simply the product of a time when Japan was beginning its long engagement with Western modernity. The trilogy *Sanshirō, And Then*, and *The Gate* (1908-1910) provided a sustained reflection on the life of middle-class men, following three different protagonists through their roles in society—student, bachelor, and husband. *Kokoro* (1914), the story of the mysterious relationships between a student, teacher, and the teacher’s wife, continues to be thought of as among the greatest in modern Japanese letters.  Through his main characters, who are mainly scholars, dilettantes, aesthetes, intellectuals, or dandies from upper- and upper-middle-class backgrounds, Sōseki’s perspectives on positions of privilege display deep commitment to problems of personal and social injustice and ethical rectitude. Sōseki’s later novels are said to be less humorous and more introspective, though they lose nothing of the concern for contemporary social issues present in the early satires. *Typhoon* and *Autumn Wind* of 1906-7, for instance, display class consciousness through their subtle depiction of spoken language. Even as the innovative stream-of-consciousness style of *The Miner* (1908) focused inward on the psyche of the protagonist, the plot sent him to the Ashio copper mines to witness class differences. Combining four distinct parts, each told through multiple vignettes, *The Wayfarer* (1912-3) gives a fragmentary view on the relationship triangle between two brothers and the wife of one. This structural technique of laying out multiple viewpoints and the resulting distillation of character is reused to acclaimed effect in *Kokoro*.  Sōseki retired to Shuzenji because of his failing heath in 1910. His condition worsened after the death of his youngest child. Written after this near-death experience, some of his more powerful later works include autobiographical reflections such as *Remembered Things* (1910) and *Behind My Glass Doors* (1915). His rejection of an honorary doctoral degree from the Ministry of Education during this later period is often compared to Ōe Kenzaburō’s rejection of the Emperor’s Order of Culture. Extremely critical of the very idea of modern civilization, Sōseki displayed a skepticism about the rapid modernization associated with the modern state that placed his work at the center of literary interest.  Sōseki made multiple lasting contributions to modernist literature. As a painter and poet, Sōseki evoked nuances of inner turmoil through subtle mentions of gesture, but it was his combination of such stylistic effects with his structural experimentation that would be inspire generations of naturalist, avant garde, and proletarian writers. Employing multiple perspectives, vignettes rather than linear narrative, and touching on deeply distressing problems of the modern condition with a touch of humor, Sōseki’s continuing influence can be read in works from authors as varied as Ōe Kenzaburō, Murakami Haruki, and Mizumura Minae. |
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