**Natsume, Sōseki (1867-1916)**

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 as path-breaking as a satirist and stylist as he was 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 odd 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.

**Timeline of Life**

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| **Year** | **Event** |
| **1867** | born |
| **1889** | Meets haiku master Matsuoka Shiki |
| **1890-1893** | Studies at Tokyo University majors in English |
| **1895** | Leaves Tokyo to teach in Ehime and later Kumamoto |
| **1896** | Marries Nakane Kyoko |
| **1900-1903** | Lives in London |
| **1903** | Teaches at Tokyo University |
| **1907** | Takes position at the *Asahi News* |
| **1910** | Retreats to Shuzenji to revive his health |
| **1916** | Dies from ulcer |

**Timeline of Select Works**

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| **Year** | **Event** |
| **1905** | “Tower of London” (Rondon tō) |
| **1905-6** | *I am a Cat* (Wagahai wa neko de aru) |
| **1906** | *Little Master* (Botchan) |
| **1906** | “Grass Pillow” (Kusamakura) and “Typhoon” (Nihykutoka) |
| **1907** | *Red Poppies* (Gubijinsō) |
| **1908** | Ten Nights of Dreams (Yumejūya), The Miner (Kōfu), Sanshirō |
| **1909** | And Then (Sore Kara) |
| **1910** | The Gate (Mon) and “Remembered Things” |
| **1912-3** | Wayfarer (Kōjin) |
| **1914** | Heart (Kokoro) |

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 he was still a student and is still regarded as one of the best. 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* caricatured the life of a teacher in Matsuyama by presenting a group of one-dimensional teachers with ethical failings. *I Am a Cat* 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* 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 problematique—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 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,* 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 lost nothing of the concern for social issues of the day present in the early satires. *Typhoon* and *Autumn Wind* of 1906-7, for instance, displayed a class consciousness through their subtle depiction of spoken language. Even as the stylistic innovation of the stream-of-consciousness *The Miner* in 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* gives a fragmentary view on the relationship triangle between two brothers and one of their wives. This structural technique of laying out multiple viewpoints and the resulting distillation of character was reused to acclaimed effect in *Kokoro*.

After retiring to Shuzenji because of his failing heath in 1910, Sōseki’s condition worsened after the death of his youngest child. Written after this near death experience, some of his more powerful later writings include works of autobiographical reflection such as *Remembered Things* and *Behind My Glass Doors*. His rejection of an honorary doctoral degree from the Ministry of Education offered during this later period is often compared to Ōe Kenzaburō’s rejection of the Emporer’s Order of Culture. Extremely critical of the very idea of modern civilization, Sōseki’s skepticism of the rapid modernization associated with the modern state placed his work at the center of literary interest.

Sōseki’s lasting contributions to modernist literature are multiple. 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.