

Kokoro (1914) Natsume Sôseki

Plot and Narrative

This work, which marks the culmination of Natsume Sôseki's singular career, has been acclaimed as *the* great Japanese novel. The title, left in the original in the work's two English translations, is the Japanese term for heart, spirit, our innermost feelings— in other words, that which makes us most identifiably human. In the hands of Natsume Sôseki, '*kokoro*' is also a challenge, a riddle. Reflecting back upon the recently-ended Meiji period (1868-1912) and the problematic modernity that it produced, the author captures the complex interplay of self-obsession and our need for others through his two chief protagonists. One, a university student and the novel's main narrator, befriends a somewhat older person whom 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 younger friend's probing questions. Guarding his privacy, Sensei admonishes the friend in a passage laden with portentous 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." (*Kokoro*, p 30)

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 abandons 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 takes up fully half of the novel, is the third of its three constituent sections. *Kokoro* is narrated in the first two sections by the young man who recounts his acquaintanceship with Sensei and his wife in part one, then his relationship with his own family, who reside in the countryside, in section two. Sensei's remarkably detailed and moving letter to his friend 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 the life of his close friend K, 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 cocoon 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— Sôseki in effect calls upon his readers to draw their own conclusions.

The resonance of Sensei's suicide with that of General Nogi Maresuke, the heroic military figure who committed ritual suicide on the day of Emperor Meiji's state funeral in September of 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.

Themes

Isolation, interiority, ego This is Sensei's burden, and the problematic legacy that he bequeaths to his young friend. Sôseki underscores the sense in which these qualities of inflated selfhood define Japanese society and modernity at the end of the Meiji period

Mistrust, betrayal, guilt Having himself been betrayed by a greedy uncle as a young man, Sensei himself falls prey to these emotions, with tragic consequences. And in turn he may have 'infected' his admiring young friend with this virus of self-obsession and moral inertia.

Failed communication, fraught relationships The characters in *Kokoro* lead insulated lives, to be sure, but they nonetheless live their lives in the context of social relationships that somehow endure. In other words, even a failed relationship has redeeming aspects. As such, *Kokoro* is by no means to be read as dystopian nightmare. Ultimately, Sôseki points to the complexity and contingency of our lives.

Confession and self-sacrifice Echoing the fate of General Nogi, who nobly sacrificed himself in the name of the deceased Meiji Emperor, Sensei gains a certain redemption through his confessional document. His subsequent 'ritual suicide' calls forth ambivalent interpretations— is this a virtuous deed? a final act of desperation? a form of madness?

The age in transition As a literary recapitulation of the momentous Meiji era, *Kokoro* underscores Japan's transition from its traditional roots and Confucian norms of civility to a modern nation marked by individualism, frayed social relations, and the anonymous, alienating cityscape.

Key Characters

Note: None of the characters in *Kokoro* is known by one's proper name, except for Sensei's wife, Shizu. (Sensei is a respectful term of address)

Unnamed first-person narrator Young and inexperienced, the narrator of sections one and two is powerfully drawn to the enigmatic Sensei, whose very reluctance to confide in him only enhances the attraction. He comes to reject his family in the countryside in the course of his increasing attraction to Sensei, who eventually displaces his own father as an object of respect. The narrator's sudden decision to abandon the dying father and return to Tokyo to be with Sensei, who has in all likelihood already taken his life, foreshadows an uncertain future and perhaps a repetition of the tragic circumstances that befell Sensei.

Sensei A lonely, melancholic man, Sensei lives in virtual seclusion from society with his wife, Shizu. We see him in the first two sections from the perspective of the young narrator, who persists in maintaining a relationship that remains curiously static and unfulfilling. We learn that Sensei's reclusive nature and bitter, melancholic persona are somehow connected to a deceased acquaintance whose grave he regularly visits, but concerning whom he divulges nothing. Sensei's confessional document reveals the tragic details— a fateful love triangle involving Ojôsan, the daughter of his boarding house landlady, and his friend, K, who ends up confessing his love for the girl before he himself has acted upon his own romantic longing. Sensei now regards his friend K as a rival, and undermines K's love for Ojôsan. His cruel betrayal leads to K's suicide. Living out his life tormented by guilt over his unforgiveable conduct, Sensei ultimately takes his own life.

K Sensei's friend is revealed to us through the confessional document that comprises section three. We learn, through Sensei's pained recounting of their relationship, that the two were inseparable, and that the young Sensei had admired K's intelligence and moral integrity. K remained guileless and innocent, taking his life in the wake of his friend's betrayal without any evident rancor or ill will. In death, then, K looms as an indelible reminder for Sensei of his cowardice and moral failings.

Ojôsan In section three, Sensei refers to the landlady's daughter using the polite term of address Ojôsan— 'young miss.' Once the two are married, following the romantic debacle involving K, her name changes— she is now Sensei's wife, Shizu. In other words, she has distinctly different personas in the novel. Yet she emerges in a sense as the novel's central mystery. She claims not to know what is going on, but we suspect that in view of her manifest intelligence and maturity, she fully understands the circumstances behind Sensei's self-imposed exile from society, yet remains unwilling or unable to reveal any of this. As for her possible future with Sensei's young friend: this remains an untold story— in a sense, the novel's implicit fourth section.

Source: Natsume Sôseki, *Kokoro*, transl. Edwin McClellan (Regnery/Gateway, 1957/2000)
Also, note the recent Meredith McKinney translation, *Kokoro* (Penguin, 2010)