

## Natsume Sôseki (1867-1916)

### **Biography**

Natsume Sôseki is one of a handful of figures who both symbolize Japan's emergence as a modern nation and helped mold an understanding of the modern condition through his life's work. Literature was Sôseki's creative vehicle, but his significance in the context of a broader national identity is greater than the sum of his individual works. In short, his stature is akin to that of Mark Twain, a consensus American icon.

Born at the end of Japan's final shogunal epoch, the Tokugawa period (1600-1868), Sôseki died several years following the death of the Meiji emperor. His life span essentially overlaps the seminal Meiji period in Japan's history (1868-1912), and his literature has long been regarded as having captured the so-called *Meiji no seishin*—the spirit of the Meiji era. Sôseki's official status as a Japanese cultural property was acknowledged in the form of his image, which long adorned the nation's thousand-yen banknote.

The Meiji mission was to create a modern nation with state-of-the-art education, technology, media, and urban development. Tokyo—the erstwhile shogunal capital—would be a showcase of Japanese modernity and the center of the nation's cultural and intellectual life. Western know-how would be privileged, together with a new social and political agenda that recognized individualism, autonomy, and equality.

Yet these modern developments had to contend with a significant conservative agenda adopted by the powerful Meiji oligarchs—themselves erstwhile samurai. Cognizant of the need to leverage Tokugawa nativist teachings as a hedge against Western hegemony, they restored the Emperor as a national sovereign, patriarch, and Shinto divinity. And they promulgated a 'uniqueness myth' centered on *kokutai*, a term meant to invoke a credo of Japanese exceptionalism. Harkening back to Japan's authoritarian past, the nation's leaders sought to mold a people attuned to their status as loyal subjects of the emperor. In short, Meiji Japan witnessed the confrontation of a resurgent traditionalism and the new ethic of individualism and freedom inspired by Western models. This seemingly incongruous design in the fabric of Meiji society would inevitably be reflected in the work of its writers and intellectuals—none more so than Natsume Sôseki.

Natsume Kinnosuke (Sôseki is a pen name) was born in Edo in 1867, one year before the city would be renamed Tokyo with the advent of the Meiji period. The Natsume family had long since lost its samurai status, and Kinnosuke's father served as a local official of no particular significance. The sixth and last child of older parents who felt the burden of an essentially unwanted child, Kinnosuke was sent out for adoption as an infant—a not uncommon practice. The lad would spend some eight years with his adoptive parents, who had serious marital problems of their own, and finally returned to his natal home when he was eight. These early experiences, with their complex emotional freight, would figure in much of his subsequent literature.

The young Kinnosuke was a brilliant student with a flair for literature—Japanese and Chinese writings, initially, then English literature. As a graduate of Tokyo Imperial University, he took on several rural teaching posts, in Shikoku and Kyûshû—experiences that would inspire one of his most popular novels. In 1896, at age twenty-nine, he married Nakane Kyôko, who was ten years younger. She would bear him six children, and they remained together despite temperamental differences and a troubled relationship. Marital problems and mutual barriers to communication would emerge as important themes in Sôseki's late novels.

In 1900, Sôseki was sent to England, at government expense, to study English literature at its source. He spent several unhappy years in London, a bitterly trying time notwithstanding his ambitious and fruitful course of study. Two serious impediments would come into play here— a chronic stomach disorder that went untreated and which precipitated his early death at age forty-nine; and a serious neurotic disorder. On the verge of a nervous breakdown, Sôseki returned to Japan in 1903, when he assumed a prestigious professorship in English literature at the Imperial University. Ill at ease in his professorial role, though, Sôseki found himself more fulfilled through creative writing. While still teaching, he achieved critical acclaim for a novel improbably entitled *I am a Cat*, and even more accolades for a second novel, *Botchan*, whose spirited and principled young protagonist was widely admired. By now committed to a literary career, Sôseki resigned from his university position— all but unthinkable at the time— and embarked on what would be a ten-year career as a professional fiction writer on the staff of the *Asahi shinbun*, one of the nation's leading newspapers. In this position he published a series of novels, which initially appeared in daily serialization, over the course of a decade. As such, his work became part of the daily reading diet of millions of Japanese. These novels, collectively, represent a new standard of excellence for modern Japanese literature.

Once established in the *bundan*, the Tokyo-based literary community, Sôseki attracted a number of protégés and disciples, and they would meet regularly on Thursdays at the Natsume home— a gathering known as the Mokuyôkai, the 'Thursday Group.' A leading author, cultural critic, and public intellectual, Sôseki fostered the career of many aspiring young writers.

In December 1916, in the midst of serializing a new novel, *Light and Darkness*, Natsume Sôseki died of his incurable stomach disorder. The nation mourned his passing.

### **Major Works**

*I am a Cat* (Wagahai wa neko de aru, 1905-06)

*Botchan* (1906)

*Sanshirô* (1908)

*Kokoro* (1914)

*Grass on the Wayside* (Michikusa, 1915)

### **The Sôseki Legacy**

Natsume Sôseki's fiction can be said to mark the coming-of-age of modern Japanese literature, from its origins in the early 1880s. The author achieved a mastery of the modern psychological novel, through which he succeeded in capturing the ebb and flow of moods, conflicted emotions, and confusion that marked his own life and that of his literary alter egos. With remarkable sensitivity and subtlety, Sôseki's literature explores the travails of individualism in the modern age. Insulated from others by circumstance and personal inclination, his characters ponder the meaning of their lives, wondering who they are and how they got to be that way. They mull over the past and sift through the traces and fragments of memory for something that might yield an answer. And they struggle— often in vain— to make sense of relationships freighted with pain, regret, and a numbing banality.

Perhaps a reflection of his melancholic temperament, Natsume Sôseki embraced a sardonic, occasionally fatalistic view of modern society and the human condition itself. His keen sensitivity to the problems and pitfalls of social relationships— especially in the context of marriage and family— and the corrosive impact of egocentrism, false pride, and mistrust would deeply color his best-known novels.

But there is more to the story— namely, a Sôseki legend that has survived his passing and that attributes a depth of understanding and gravitas to the man and his literary creations. At its core is an epigram with which the author is closely associated— *sokuten kyoshi*— 'Be in accord with heaven and reject the self.' Like many such legends, the exact source is unclear. Yet generations of disciples and admirers have maintained that the man and his writings embodied a higher wisdom. It is either ironic or entirely fitting that an individual so sensitive to the corrosive forces at work in modern society, and so skeptical about the future, should emerge as a modern-day sage.