

Grass on the Wayside (Michikusa, 1915)

Natsume Sôseki

Plot and Narrative

Natsume Sôseki's last complete novel, *Grass on the Wayside*, is also the most clearly autobiographical. A final novel, *Light and Darkness* (Meian), was left incomplete at the time of Sôseki's death on December 9, 1916.

Modeled upon the Natsume household following the author's return from his two-year stay in London, *Grass on the Wayside* presents a family drama that revisits the author's signature themes of egotistic self-absorption, smug complacency, and failed communication. The married couple at the novel's center—Kenzô and Osumi—inhabit an uneasy domestic terrain that pits them against one another, with the inevitable harvest of wounded pride and mutual exasperation. Theirs is an emotional tug-of-war that captures the fraught 'terms of engagement' emblematic of a modern marriage. The novel resonates remarkably with our own litany of social malaise.

Grass on the Wayside is channeled principally through the husband, Kenzô—a conceited, cranky intellectual who is prone to melancholy reflections on his past. He is beset by haunting memories of childhood in an adoptive family, the Shimadas. Recently, Kenzô has been approached by his erstwhile adoptive father for a financial settlement, even though the adoption had been formally nullified. The burden of filial duty, as opposed to legal responsibility, weighs upon Kenzô, and his pained reflections on his unhappy childhood only reinforce the dour outlook on his present circumstance and on the state of things in general.

Worse yet, Kenzô is saddled with a wife who he is convinced can neither understand nor appreciate him. Kenzô does harbor a certain grudging affection for Osumi but remains unwilling or unable to express it. For her part, Osumi is driven to distraction by her blowhard of a husband, wishing that he would let down his guard for once and treat her with some semblance of kindness and solicitude.

Kenzô felt that she somehow managed to misunderstand him. "As far as you're concerned," she had said, "I'm nothing but a stupid woman." Kenzô decided that it was too much trouble to explain himself to her. There were times when even the simplest remarks could not be exchanged without misunderstanding. Still carrying in his mind the sinister figure of Shimada, Kenzô returned to his study and sat down to brood. His wife went about her business, tired of this husband of hers who remained aloof from his family. If he wanted to shut himself off in his miserable cell, she was not about to stop him (Based on *Grass*, pp 90-91)

Grass on the Wayside is a notably introspective and serious work—claustrophobic in effect—and its lack of dramatic pacing and bright touches has worked against its achieving a broad readership. This reflects the circumstances of the author, who was himself undergoing personal difficulties and deteriorating health. Painfully aware of the sort of person he was and the sort of marriage he had, Sôseki succeeded in 'empowering' the figure of Osumi, endowing her with a strong persona and a voice of her own. Both husband and wife thus manage to vent their frustrations and their pique. The couple's defensive gambits and rationalizations constitute the novel's central motif.

Grass on the Wayside explores a difficult—albeit not exceptional—relationship, and the frustrating attempts by two willful and proud individuals to stake their own positions in the marital tug-of-war. It ends with no clear resolution, even though the matter concerning Shimada appears to have been resolved. Throughout, the reader is afforded a penetrating view of how we negotiate our most intimate social

relationships. We witness the ebb and flow of tedium, rancor, pride, and pettiness— together with an underlying current of affection— perhaps even love.

Grass on the Wayside concludes with one final sparring match, which concerns the agreed-upon payoff that was meant to settle things with Shimada.

“What a relief,” [Osumi] said. “At least the affair is finally settled.” . . .

“But it isn’t, you know. Hardly anything in life is settled. Things that happen once will go on happening. . .” He spoke bitterly, almost with venom.

His wife gave no answer. She picked up the baby and kissed its red cheeks. “Nice baby, nice baby. We don’t know what daddy is talking about, do we?” (Based on *Grass*, pp 168-69)

Themes

Self-absorption, pride, and pettiness These dubious qualities are associated with Kenzô, and as a theme they recall Sôseki’s novel *Kokoro*, published a year earlier.

Marriage as cold war and test of the will *Grass on the Wayside* amounts to a clinical case study of modern marriage as a contest.

Marriage as social anchor and basis for a stable order At the same time, the novel points to aspects of marriage— and, more broadly, to modern social institutions— that help forge order, stability, and a basis for our identity and sense of self.

The haunting past and its psychic toll of melancholy and pained resignation Recalling Sôseki’s *Kokoro*, *Grass on the Wayside* approaches modern selfhood as an arena for the interplay of memory, episodes from the past, and the relentless demands of one’s present circumstance.

Key Characters:

Kenzô Clearly an autobiographical projection of the author and the Natsume family situation following his return from England, Kenzô is alienated from his wife, whom he regards as an antagonist, and beneath him intellectually. Surly, conceited, and introverted, Kenzô is an academic who prefers to sequester himself in his study, where he reflects on his situation and the world in general. At the same time, he feels responsible for dealing with his dysfunctional family— in particular, his asthmatic sister and her wastrel of a husband. This only aggravates his sense of futility. Then, haunted by the spectral figure of Shimada, he is reduced to even more despairing ruminations on the past and on his sorry present circumstance.

Osumi Modelled upon Sôseki’s wife Kyôko, Osumi is an unassuming woman who does her best to accommodate her peevish and inconsiderate husband. Yet her point of view is presented in parallel with that of her husband. Osumi is given a distinctive voice and a personal claim to autonomy and agency. The couple’s standoff, locked as they are in a loveless and occasionally hostile relationship, amounts to a sort of limbo, which all but defines the novel. It bears noting that Sôseki’s wife Kyôko published a very revealing memoir detailing her relationship with, and attitude toward, her famous husband.

Shimada Kenzô’s erstwhile adoptive father, Shimada is the ‘haunting figure’ who triggers Kenzô’s troubled reflections and appears in person to make repeated demands, seeking in effect to extort money from Kenzô by playing on the latter’s weakness and vulnerability. We observe him predominately from Kenzô’s perspective.

Source: Natsume Sôseki, *Grass on the Wayside* (Michikusa, 1915), transl. Edwin McClellan (Chicago, 1969)