

A Comparative Study of Natsume Soseki's *Kokoro* and Ernest Hemingway's *Islands in the Stream*

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The purpose of this paper is to give a new perspective to these two novels by comparing and contrasting two seemingly very different writers and their main characters.

At first glance these two writers seem to be as different from each other as can be. We see Soseki, the scholar, and Hemingway the adventurer. Upon closer examination, however, there appear some strong similarities.

Natsume Soseki (1867-1916)

Soseki is sometimes called the Charles Dickens of Japan. He is generally thought to be the greatest novelist of the Meiji period (1868-1912). During the Meiji period Japan was being introduced to and influenced by the West. Soseki's own lifetime was very close to the dates that the Meiji Emperor ruled. Soseki could represent Japan's appetite for, and disappointment with, those influences from the West. At least ten of his novels have been translated into English (about as many as Mishima's).

Soseki began his career as a scholar of English Literature. He lived and studied in England and found it to be an unpleasant experience. When he returned to Japan he came back to the prestigious position of teaching English Literature at Tokyo University. He replaced the popular lecturer Lafcadio Hearn which proved to be another unhappy experience.

Soseki didn't have the charisma of Hearn in the classroom. Students found his classes to be difficult and boring. At the time that he might have become a tenured professor he quit teaching to write for newspapers and later he wrote novels.

His novels are influenced by his study of the English literature tradition but show no great influence of any particular writer. His work shows a greater variety of styles than in most novelists' work.

His novels all take place in Japan and often deal with the problems facing modern Japanese intellectuals.

Soseki's popular character Botchan has become to Japanese literature what Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn are to the United States.

Soseki's work ranges from the lighthearted to the extremely alienated. *Kokoro* is generally considered to be his most pessimistic and brooding novel.

Soseki, like his character "Sensei," lived a life of quiet alienation. Born the youngest of eight children, his father was fifty-three and his mother was forty. Being ashamed of having a child so late in life, his parents sent him away to a foster home. This could have contributed to his feeling of alienation. The family that raised him was unhappily married and got divorced when he was nine years old. He returned to his real parents only to

have his mother die when he was thirteen. Sensei, the protagonist in *Kokoro* displays alienation and loneliness, which seem very much like an autobiography of Soseki.

Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961)

Hemingway was born in Oak Park, Illinois, on July 21, 1899. After graduating from high school Hemingway took a job writing for the *Kansas City Star*. He left *The Star* after only a few months to serve as a volunteer ambulance driver in Italy during WW1. He was unable to join the Army due to a defective eye. He was later wounded while with the Italian infantry. After the war he became a correspondent for *The Toronto Star*. Hemingway then settled in Paris and like Soseki, turned to creative writing. Hemingway was encouraged by Ezra Pound and Gertrude Stein, with whom he later quarreled. Hemingway later spent much of his time in Key West Florida. In "*Islands in the Stream*" we can feel his experience with the sea and the tropics. During the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), he went to Spain as a newspaper correspondent. Again in WW2 (1939-1945), he was a correspondent and reporter for *The United States First Army*.

Hemingway later settled in Cuba before moving to Idaho in 1958.

Hemingway: war correspondent, fisherman, hunter, and fan of bullfighting and prize fighting; could anyone seem less like the withdrawn Soseki? As we will see later, although *Islands in the Stream* is packed with adventure, violence and occasional humor, there is an undercurrent of despair and desolation, running throughout the entire book.

Hemingway is considered to be one of the leading authors of the "Lost Generation", the period

between WW1 and WW2. Both Hemingway and Soseki dealt with moral values and social concerns. Both Soseki and Hemingway also have a purity of style in their art. They stay away from unnecessary details in their writing, leaving only the essential elements. This leads to a style, which appears simple, even perhaps childlike, but in fact leaves writing which is characterized by crispness, laconic dialog and emotional understatement.

Hemingway dealt with men and women who lost their faith in moral values due to WW1. The change in moral values in Japan due to war is also an important aspect of Soseki's work. The idea of, and search for "honor" is to be seen in both Soseki's Sensei and Hemingway's Thomas Hudson. Although Hemingway shows more interest in primitive emotions such as those of bullfighters and lone fishermen, both authors use characters with single-minded and often futile purposes. In Hemingway's first work, "*In Our Time*" (1924) he tells stories of his experiences in the woods of northern Michigan. In 1927 he wrote "*The Killers*", a story describing impending doom. "*Winner Take Nothing*" (1933) is also very similar to Soseki in its stories of people in uncomfortable situations in Europe.

Both Soseki and Hemingway use simple sentences calculated to describe actions, leaving the reader to find the reason and the emotions behind the action. They do not talk directly of emotions, rather illustrate the emotion through actions.

It must be pointed out here that when I refer to Soseki's *Kokoro* I am in fact talking about the English translation by Edwin McClellan. McClellan states that he tried to keep the simplicity used in the original and also its beauty. "In the original there is a beauty beneath the surface simplicity, especially in the third part. I can only hope that at least a little of the beauty remained in the translation. I have tried at any rate to retain this simplicity."

Both *Kokoro* and *Islands in the Stream* are divided into three parts.

Kokoro's three parts run clearly from one into the next, while *Islands in the Stream* seems almost to be a trilogy. One could read any of the three parts as a short story. Both make great use of writing in the first person, *Kokoro* entirely so. In *Islands in the Stream* use of the first person is mainly in the form of memories where Thomas Hudson is thinking about his past. The protagonists in both novels deal in their own way with loss and loneliness and, finally, death. Sensei commits suicide to escape the loneliness and guilt he feels and Thomas Hudson is wounded through an act of war. While Thomas Hudson is dying on the deck of a ship, his friend Willie says to him on the last page of the book "Tommy I love you, you son of a bitch and don't die." "Try and understand if it isn't too hard." To which Hudson replies "I think I understand Willie." That brings us to the final line of the book in which Willie says, "You never understand anybody that loves you." It is a sad and lonely, yet strangely beautiful ending. It is interesting to remember that Sensei committed suicide while Thomas Hudson dies a more heroic death as a soldier. In fact Hemingway did take his own life, while Soseki died as a result of a stomach ulcer.

Soseki introduces the solitude of his character in the first few pages of his book, page 14, "I am a lonely man," Sensei said. And I am glad that you come to see me. But I am also a melancholy man, and I asked you why you should wish to visit me so often. And again on page 15, "But surely when you are with me you cannot rid yourself of your loneliness. I have not it in me to help you forget it. You will have to look elsewhere for the consolation you seek. And soon you will find that you no longer want to visit me."

Hemingway starts out by giving us a good deal of background information about Thomas Hudson.

He describes his house, the island it is on, the type of painting Hudson does and how he spends his days painting, gathering driftwood. Remembering things and trying not to remember things. We get hints of his loneliness, although we also see that he has friends and pleasure in his life, something we do not really find in Sensei. We learn that Hudson has three sons from two women and that he is now divorced from both of them. Where Sensei deals with his loneliness by withdrawing from the world, Thomas Hudson faces his loneliness using the opposite solution. He throws himself into his work. Page 13, "Five weeks is a good long time to be with people that you love and wish to be with always."

But why did I ever leave Tom's mother in the first place?

You'd better not think about that, he told himself. That is one thing you had better not think about. And these are fine children you got from the other one. She is a fine woman and you never should have left her either. Then he said to himself, yes. I had to. But he did not much worry about any of it. He had long ago ceased to worry and he had exorcized with work insofar as he could, and all he cared about now was that the boys were coming over and that they should have a good summer. Then he would go back to work.

(Neither the spell-check on Microsoft Word, nor the Kenkyusha's Lighthouse English-Japanese dictionary had the word 'exorcized' with a 'z'. Both sources spelled it exorcised. In the book however it is spelled with a 'z'.)

Where Sensei chooses to ignore the world, Thomas Hudson chooses to ignore his own feelings and lose himself in work and interaction with others. Although they take different approaches, both men try to ignore a reality, and for the same reason. They are both trying in their way to deal with their feelings of loneliness and guilt.

It is interesting to see how the two writers describe a "fight" scene. Hemingway has Thomas Hudson watching his friend Roger in a fight on the Island. Page 45, "He took a swing at Roger and Roger hit him in the mouth with a left and his mouth started to bleed. He swung at Roger and again Roger hooked him hard to his left eye twice. He grabbed hold of Roger and Roger's sweatshirt tore when he dug the man in the belly hard with his right and then pushed him away and slapped him hard across the face backhand with his open hand." This fight scene goes on for two pages. Soseki/Sensei describes his version of violence, "College students in those days were considerably more violent and barbaric than they are now. One student I knew, for example, got into a fight with an apprentice one night and hurt him rather badly on the head with his wooden clogs." Hitting someone on the head with a shoe seems more comic than barbaric. Hudson's three sons come to the island for the summer vacation and the first part of the book holds some happy scenes of swimming and fishing and joking and telling family stories. When the boys leave, as does Hudson's friend Roger, the bar owner, Bobby, says, "It's going to be goddamn lonely." And Hudson admits, "It's going to be goddamn lonely." The end of summer fun is also the end of any happiness to come. On page 193, Hemingway turns up the emotional volume through action, "Thomas Hudson was unhappy as soon as the boys were gone."

Then one day a boy brings a message, "He read it. Then he put it in his pocket and went out the door and sat on the porch by the sea. He took the radio form out and read it again. Your sons Andrew and David killed with their mother in motor accident..." Here at the end of the first part of the book we are face to face with Thomas Hudson's sorrow. Soseki makes us wait till the end of the book to reveal the reason for Sensei's alienation.

Where Sensei holds on to the memories of his

friend's death many years ago, Thomas Hudson tries to "let it go". While on a ship going to France where he will take care of the details of the deaths, page 195, "Give them up now, he told himself, just remember how they were and write them off. You have to do it sooner or later. Do it now." And, "You haven't any problem at all, he told himself. You've given them up and they're gone. You should not have loved them so much in the first place." Hemingway ends each of the three parts with a conclusive sentence, which elicits a sense of the irony of emotions denied. Page 198 ends part 1 with the sentence, "You see, he said to himself, there's nothing to it."

At the beginning of *Kokoro* we are also treated to some fun at the beach and a few drinks at Sensei's house. The young man graduates which greatly pleases his family but we see in Sensei only brooding unhappiness. Soseki closes part 1 with a characteristic acceptance of doom. Page 73, "I remembered Sensei saying, 'Which of us will die first?'" and I thought, "How can anyone answer such a question? And if Sensei knew the answer what would he do? Probably, they would behave exactly as if they did not know. As I am sitting here now, helpless though I know that my father is waiting to die..." I felt then the helplessness of man and vanity of his life"

With these two closing sentences, we can see the basic difference between the Hemingway/Hudson character and that of the Soseki/Sensei character.

Again both men are dealing with loneliness and the resulting sorrow. "You see he said, there's nothing to it." Hudson is drinking and fighting with his sorrow. He believes he can change the way he feels by his own behavior.

"I felt then the helplessness of man and the vanity of his life." Sensei shows clearly a fatalistic attitude of being able to change nothing and being a victim of a cruel fate. He feels that sorrow is the condition of his life and that nothing will change

that but his own death.

Part 2 of both books move rather more slowly than part 1. In *Kokoro* the young man returns home after graduation. His father is ill and Sensei becomes more aloof. The young man writes him a letter asking for help in finding a job but months go by with no answer.

Here we learn of the death of the Emperor. Soseki uses the Emperor as a symbol for a way of life. He sees the end of the Meiji period as the end of a more noble, honorable way of life. I believe he would say a "more unpolluted Japanese way of life". It is no secret that Soseki was disillusioned with life in the West. The speaker in *Kokoro* represents the post-Meiji Japan. When the speaker returns to his home, differences between him and his family become apparent. His father identifies himself in terms of the Meiji period and with the Emperor. When hearing that the Emperor was ill, the father says on page 90, "It does look like His Majesty's illness is not unlike mine." Upon hearing of the Emperor's illness the father's own condition quickly declines. A difference between the two generations can be seen when discussing the plans for a dinner party to celebrate the speaker's graduation. Page 91, "They had then decided to hold it the following week. One might say that due to the easygoing ways of my parents, who, like all country people, could do nothing in a hurry, I had been spared an unpleasant social obligation. But my mother, who did not understand me could not see this." When the emperor dies the young man tells us of his father's reaction. "Oh! His Majesty is gone at last. I too..." My father then fell silent." This too could be interpreted as meaning that life after the Meiji Emperor was one seen by the father as being without honor and not worth living.

We learn next of the death of General Nogi, who killed himself after hearing of the Emperor's death.

(We will look at this point in greater detail in part 3.) The father is becoming delirious and says on page 117; "Will General Nogi ever forgive me? How can I ever face him without shame? Yes General, I will be with you very soon."

A letter finally arrives from Sensei in which he writes that at the time the letter is being read he is probably dead.

In *Islands in the Stream*'s second part, Thomas Hudson is in Cuba. He is restless and talking to his cats and wrestling with memories. He is also waiting for possible orders to go to sea in search of German submarines. This is not the smooth transition from part 1 to part 2 that we see in *Kokoro*. Here the three parts of the book are like three short stories about the same man. You can understand one without knowing the others, but only by reading all three can you see the complex image. Part 2 has few light moments; in fact, it deals mainly with death. It is painting a portrait of a man deeply concerned with death, but as is his way, he is trying not to think about it. Part 2 starts with Thomas Hudson having a long talk with his cat, Boise. Page 204, "He thought that he did not know what he would do if Boise should be killed. He thought from his actions and his desperations, that the cat felt the same way about the man." In part 2 we see many long, lonely hours spent with his cat. And long memories of women he had known. For over 50 pages we seem to hear nothing but the ramblings of a very lonely man remembering better times. Then Hemingway takes us a little further into darkness. Page 257, "There you are. And you call me edgy. Look, Thomas. We're good friends. I've known you and your boy Tom for years. By the way how is he? He's dead." This is the first time any of the characters in part 1 is referred to in part 2. Hemingway hits us head on with this terrible information. Thomas Hudson has lost his third and last son. Here is a good example of the separateness of the three parts of the book. Part 2 could be read as

a short story without having read part 1.

We see Thomas Hudson in part 2 as almost numb. We see a man who continues to perform, unlike Sensei who does nothing. Hudson however is becoming much more like Sensei in that, although he remains active, he no longer cares. We see a man who is becoming emotionally exhausted. He meets his ex-wife, Tom's mother, the woman he had loved the most. She is married but they end up making love again. He avoids talking about Tom. Page 311, "You don't want to talk about him." She said. "Why? I think it's better." "He looks too much like you." "That isn't it," she said. "Tell me, is he dead?" "Sure." They have a long and heated conversation about why they ever broke up. Hudson then gets a call to report at once. As he is preparing to leave he says to himself, "Get it straight. Your boy you lose. Love you lose. Honor has been gone for a long time. Duty you do." When he leaves the mother knows that now she has lost, "both of them." The final sentence in part 2, page 320, is Tom's mother saying, "You don't know either," she said. "And neither does anyone else."

In the third and final parts, we can see a much greater similarity between the two men. In *Kokoro*, Sensei reveals the source of his sorrows in the letter. The reason, although very sad, does not seem tragic enough to have made him withdraw so completely from the world at such a young age. The reader can sense a more autobiographical rather than literal purpose for this device. Sensei, as a young man, was in love with the same girl that his good friend, (known to us only as K), wanted. When K found out that Sensei wanted to marry the girl, he killed himself. A difference in literary technique here is that Soseki from the beginning shows us the result, and only at the end reveals the reason.

Hemingway tells us early in the book what happened to Thomas Hudson and at the end shows the

result in the slow withdrawal and tiring of life. We learn that Sensei did not always 'do nothing'. Page 238, "I thought that in the midst of a corrupt world I managed to remain virtuous. Because of K however, my self-confidence was shattered. With a shock, I realized that I was no better than my uncle. I became disgusted with myself as I had been with the rest of the world. Actions of any kind became impossible for me. Having failed to bring myself alive among books, I tried for a while to forget myself by drowning myself in sake."

Here at the end of the book, we see that Sensei had once been much like Thomas Hudson. We shall also see that Thomas Hudson is becoming like Sensei as he loses interest in the world.

In the third and final part of *Islands in the Stream* we find Thomas Hudson at sea. He is in charge of a small crew and the boat. They are searching for German sailors who lost their ship and stole a boat from a fishing village, killing the villagers. We see that he is having sleep problems. Not that he cannot sleep, but that he does not want to. When told that he should get some sleep he often responds. "Rest is as good as sleep."

The other members of the crew are concerned about him. Page 346, "Tom," Ara said. "All a man has is pride. Sometimes you have it so much it is a sin. We have all done things for pride that we knew were impossible. We didn't care. But a man must implement his pride with intelligence and care. Now that you have ceased to be careful of yourself I must ask you to be, please. For us and for the ship." And later Henry says, "Tom, we talked of it and we all agreed that you need some rest. You've been driving yourself past what a man can stand. You are past it now." In the beginning of the book, Thomas Hudson talks about how he has disciplined himself to work at his painting every day. He did at that point spend his time and energy on the solitary act of painting but not to the extent of excluding the rest of the world. Now in part 3 we see that he

is closing himself off to everything but the task of finding the Germans. Page 353, Henry says,

“...only you stop flogging yourself. ‘I’m not really.’ Thomas Hudson said. I don’t think about anything but work.” There are of course great personality differences between the Hemingway-/Hudson character and that of Soseki/Sensei. Where Sensei dwells in a dark state of mind and actively seeks death, Thomas Hudson simply accepts it and thinks about the good times in his past. But at the end we see two men who look at death with resolve and relief. Sensei shows a final consideration for his wife by asking that she never be told that he committed suicide.

Hudson takes the coming of death with calm and a sense of beauty. When the crew finally encounters the Germans Hudson is shot several times and is bleeding to death on the deck. Page 446, “The ship was heading toward the blue hills and gathering speed. ‘Tommy,’ Willie said. ‘I love you, you son of a bitch, and don’t die.’ Thomas Hudson looked at him without moving his head. ‘Try and understand if it isn’t too hard.’ Thomas Hudson looked at him. He felt far away now and there were no problems at all. He felt the ship gathering her speed and the lovely throb of her engines against his shoulder blades which rested hard against the boards. He looked up and there was the sky that he always loved and he looked across at the great lagoon that he was quite sure, now, he would never paint and he eased his position a little to lessen the pain. The engines were around three thousand now, he thought, and they came through the deck and into him.

“I think I understand, Willie, he said.”

This brings us to the powerfully conclusive final sentence. “Oh, shit,” Willie said. “You never understand anybody that loves you.”

We see in these two books, writers of very different backgrounds, temperament, and time portraying the same human emotion of facing death as a

welcome relief to loneliness. It is also worth noting that in both books, the ending leaves us without 100% certainty that the characters do in fact die.

In conclusion, we see two men who studied the English language as a science. By this I mean that they studied facts and formulas. They both later turned to seeing language as an art form to express and elicit human emotions, not only to state facts. Hemingway in particular uses uncommon punctuation and structures to create a feeling of ‘real’ conversations between working people. Soseki uses language more suited to the people he portrays, middle class intellectuals.

We see too, that both writers create characters much like themselves and chose to concentrate on some very dark human emotions.

Two men, and two books, that at first appeared to have nothing in common, do upon close inspection, show strong similarities.

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(2002. 10. 28. 受稿)