

Resistance to Westernization in the Meiji Era: *Kokoro* and *The Peony Garden*

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82-278 Japanese Film And Literature: The Art Of Storytelling

1. Introduction

The research question posed was: What have you learned about Japanese culture from the work(s) of your choice? I chose to analyze both Natsume Soseki's *Kokoro* and Nagai Kafu's *The Peony Garden*. From these works, I was able to understand a bit about the opinions some Japanese held concerning the changes of the Meiji era.

Both of these works express a negative viewpoint on the many momentous changes to Japanese culture that began with the Meiji Restoration, showing a desire on the part of the Japanese to preserve elements of their traditional culture even in the face of Westernization.

For hundreds of years, Japan had imposed a policy of near-total isolation from the rest of the world on itself. This ended abruptly with the arrival of US Navy Commodore Perry, who, with his technologically advanced fleet of black ships, forced Japan to begin trade with the rest of the world (Hunt 712).

Japan, finding itself completely outmatched by Western technology, became aware of the fact that Western powers had been conquering and colonizing less powerful countries. To protect itself from a similar fate, Japan made a complete pivot from allowing virtually no trade or import of foreign information, to aggressively adopting and researching Western ideas, technology, and

weaponry. This strategy quickly led to Japan establishing itself as a great power on the world stage.

Although Japan adopted Western ideas and technology to quickly modernize and prevent the West from conquering and colonizing it, ironically, the very act of Westernizing and industrializing their culture can be viewed as "colonization" of Japan by the West, in a sense.

Both Natsume Soseki (1867 – 1916) and Nagai Kafu (1879 - 1959) lived in the Meiji era (1868 - 1912), which began after the arrival of Perry's ships and the end of the self-imposed closed-country policy. In both *Kokoro* and *The Peony Garden*, these authors make mention of the rapid industrialization and Westernization brought on by the era. And it is often portrayed in a less-than-flattering manner.

Goossen (1997, p. xiv) describes how writers during this tumultuous time period, the "trail-blazers," adapted and incorporated Western ideas into their writings, but maintained a distinctly Japanese style when doing so. Perhaps it was a desire to not have Japanese culture be completely subsumed by the West that led to the often-times critical outlook on Westernization. Or perhaps it was frustration with the West and its literature for being too different from traditional Japan, leading some writers of the time to feel "cheated" (Goossen 1997, p. xii).

In any case, the reaction from many Japanese writers during and after the Meiji period to the rampant Westernization of the time was not altogether positive.

2. Evidence

2.1. Industrialization and Disappointment in *The Peony Garden*

In Nagai Kafu's *The Peony Garden*, a man and woman are making their way to a famous peony garden. As they approach the garden, they notice the effects of modernization and industrialization that was "well underway" (Goossen 1997, p. xiv) at this point in Japan. They see the "luxuriant spring foliage" being blocked by "earthen walls" (Kafu 47), and ominous "black towers against the evening sky" (Kafu 49), evoking images of tall skyscrapers. Then, when the man and woman arrive at the peony garden, the flowers all seem to be in ill health or dying. The man and woman express their disappointment at this fact.

It seems that Kafu wants us to consider the negative effects that rampant industrialization may have on traditional, natural beauty in Japan. This establishes *The Peony Garden* as a story of political and social comment, as noted by Goossen (1997, p. xxviii). Kafu wants the Japanese to not allow industrialization to completely overtake and erase the natural beauty of Japan, which up until now was not under any major threat of being completely erased, because Japan had not yet industrialized. The choice between industrialization and preservation of nature was one faced by politicians and citizens for the first time in earnest in the Meiji era.

The story is also one of the water trade (Goossen 1997, p. xxv), given the occupation of the woman, as well as a story of love and obsession (Goossen 1997, p. xxiii), given the woman's apparent infatuation with the man and the casual way in which they talk about possibly

committing suicide together. But the fact that the climax of the story, which is then when they arrive at the peony garden and find it altogether underwhelming, is brought on by the industrialization mentioned throughout the story, makes *The Peony Garden* first and foremost a story of political and social comment, protesting the effects of industrialization on Japan.

2.2. Abandonment of Tradition in *Kokoro*

In Natsume Soseki's *Kokoro*, a man, K, confesses his love to Sensei, his friend, for Ojosan, a mutual friend of theirs. Although K had been raised in a strict environment by parents who exhorted him to live by traditional, unselfish Confucian ideologies, K finds himself in love with Ojosan. This concept of fierce, passionate romantic love was new to Japan (Goossen 1997, p. xiii). It is K's love for Ojosan, and Sensei's selfishness in driving K away from Ojosan, which leads K to suicide.

It seems as though Soseki intends for K to symbolize the danger of straying too far from tradition. K was brought up in the traditional manner, and had planned to become a pious, selfless monk. But with the advent of highly individualistic, Western-style emotions in his life, like his own love for Ojosan, and Sensei's selfish betrayal of his friend's trust, K's life is thrown into turmoil, and he cannot bear it.

Of course, with this confession, *Kokoro* establishes itself plainly as a story of love and obsession (Goossen 1997, p. xxiii). It is also, however, a story of political and social comment (Goossen 1997, p. xxviii). K is a symbol for the struggle the Japanese were dealing with as Western ideas

and belief systems were being imported into the country for the first time in earnest. K, and the general Japanese public at that time, had to struggle with the sometimes quite uncomfortable and unusual changes brought on by attempting to understand these foreign, Western ideas, which often clashed greatly with the culture and values of traditional Japan.

2.3. Neglect of Family in *Kokoro*

Also in Natsume Soseki's *Kokoro*, the narrator, a fresh graduate from a university based in the highly Westernized Tokyo, describes his interactions with his family, who live out simple, traditional lives in the countryside.

The narrator grouses over his parent's enthusiasm over his graduation and their desire to throw him a party in celebration, which makes his parents, who are genuinely excited and happy for him, quite upset (Natsume ch. 37). He requests money to support himself when he leaves them to return to Tokyo to look for a job, and his father comments on how different this is from the "old days" (Natsume ch. 44). And the narrator gives his parents not so much as a second thought when he receives a letter from Sensei and leaves for Tokyo without any notice.

In these examples, the narrator is acting in quite a self-centered manner. Goossen (1997, p. xiii) comments on how individualism, too, was a new concept in Japan introduced by the West. It is notable that none of these examples portray the narrator in a favorable light: quite the opposite. It seems that Natsume wants us to consider these instances of individualism, embodied with the

narrator, clashing with traditionalism, embodied by the parents, and how this often results in sadness.

3. Conclusion

To answer the research question: What have you learned about Japanese culture from the work(s) of your choice? I chose to analyze both Natsume Soseki's *Kokoro* and Nagai Kafu's *The Peony Garden*. Both of these works were written in the Meiji era, and both works offer some political and social comment on said era.

These works express criticize the extent and scale of the momentous changes to Japanese culture in the Meiji era, and express a desire on to preserve elements of traditional Japanese culture, instead of being totally dominated by Westernization.

In *The Peony Garden*, Kafu analyzes industrialization and its negative effects on natural beauty, and in *Kokoro*, Soseki note the increasing commonality of abandonment of tradition and neglect of family in the era.

Both authors, so-called trail-blazers of the era (Goossen 1997, p. xiv), provide their thoughts on the social and political climate of the Meiji era through these works. It was through these works I was able to learn about the opinions of the Japanese concerning this important time period.

Works

- Natsume, Soseki. *Kokoro*. Translated by Meredith Mckinney, Penguin, 1914.
- Nagai Kafu, The Peony Garden. In Goossen ed.(1997) *The Oxford Book of Japanese Short Stories* (pp. 45-51). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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- Goossen, Theodore W. (1997) Introduction. In Goossen ed. *The Oxford Book of Japanese Short Stories* (pp. xi-xxxi). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
 - Hunt, Lynn, Thomas R. Martin, Barbara H. Rosenwein, R. Po-chia Hsia et al. (2009) *The Making of the West, Peoples and Cultures*. Vol. C. 3rd ed. Boston: Bedford/ St. Martin's.
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