

Contrasting views of a changing society

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Modernizing Japan

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Revolution, change, modernization, evolution, rebirth are all words encompassed in one major event that marked the ending of the old ways and the beginning of the new ones in the history of one nation, Japan. The land of the rising sun and its people witnessed the end of an era when the Tokugawa shogun and his armies were defeated by the Satsuma – Choshu alliance, which represented the reestablishment of Imperial rule. This change brought many things along with it, such as new policies in regards of foreign affairs, implemented a different social structure and in general was a turning point in the development of the country. Nevertheless, reactions to the transition were not always the same, people who had been living under one regime for too long could hardly adapt, while the new generations did not have to deal with adaptation since this was their era.

During the Meiji period many aspects of the Japanese life experienced dramatic transformations. Society, in general, saw the shifting from oriental to a more westernized type of social life. Urban centers suddenly experienced a considerable moment of prosperity, hence it became very appealing for people living in the country to look at cities as a place where opportunities were abundant, from a professional, educational and personal standpoints. There was a view by many youngsters in which the country represented the old, while cities symbolized the new. A good example of this trends and contrasting perspectives is appreciated in the literary work “Kokoro” by Japanese author Natsume Soseki.

The book narrative offers readers the possibility of distinguishing changing times and perspectives from the characters’ points of view and experiences. The two main characters specifically portray in certain points of the plot the contrasting ideas they had while looking at life and society from a modern and a more traditional angles. *I* and *Sensei*, are good examples of how switching from one century to another and from one regime to another can truly affect the way we see and perceive things, even in our daily lives.

There are several instances in which we can appreciate how their views diverge from one another. One of such instances is represented by their views on the aforementioned city and urban life styles. The narrator, or *I*, is frequently complaining of his having to go back to his parents’ home in the country. He states that he prefers to stay in Tokyo and avoid meeting his parents’ neighbors who seem to annoy him just because there are easily impress and looking to escape from their daily routines. “They came with one end in view, which was to eat and drink, and they were the sort of people that waited eagerly for any event which might provide a break in the monotony of their lives” (Soseki, Natsume. *Kokoro*, 2). According to him, they made too much fuss over nothing and he felt uncomfortable.

He also considers life in the big city to be more challenging and lively, “I thought of Tokyo. And it seemed that with each heartbeat, the yearning within me for action increased” (Soseki, Natsume. *Kokoro*, 1). These were both examples of how for a young man who had been born in the country side grew weary of such life, finding that living in Tokyo was more satisfying. On the other hand, *Sensei* remembers how during his youth he loved visiting his parents’ house regardless of their absence, since he explains how they died long ago.

Nonetheless, he also states “I loved my home; and when parted from it, there was a yearning for it in my heart. I was like a traveler who, no matter where he goes, never doubts that he will someday return to his place of birth” (Soseki, Natsume, *Kokoro*, 3). The same is expressed several times in the third chapter of the book. These examples show us how people born before the Meiji period saw life in a more traditional way, while those born by the end of it, thought of life and traditions as old-fashioned things.

However, there were many more aspects in which the differences can be seen. Education and future were also points in which one generation differed from the other. While *I* attends school regularly; it is obvious that he does not care too much about it. He does not work on his thesis diligently but rather waits until the deadline is approaching to focus on his work, asking even *Sensei* for advice on his topic. *I* shows his lack of enthusiasm for school saying “While the others, it seemed, had been busy for some time collecting their material and accumulating notes, I alone had done nothing except promise myself that I would start work on my thesis in the New Year” (Soseki, Natsume. *Kokoro*, 1). On the other hand *Sensei* often speaks of how dedicated he and his friend *K* were in regards of school. He talks about how much the read and how the two of them were somehow knowledgeable people. Perhaps *I*'s lack of eagerness resides in the fact that university students do not receive much respect even after graduation, thus showing he does not care about his diploma when he gets it. On the contrary, *Sensei* states that “...in those days, university students were regarded with more respect than they are now” (Soseki, Natsume. *Kokoro*, 3). This reflects another difference between older and younger generations.

Another interesting aspect in which dissimilarities can be found is probably the one that has more impact in the whole story; that is marriage and love. *I* mentions that younger generations are more open-minded and free in spirit, while older people were more timid in regards of love relationships. This is very important since he mentions that his friend's mother is trying to persuade him to marry someone against his will, he then goes on to add that “According to our modern outlook, he was really too young to marry” (Soseki, Natsume. *Kokoro* 1). On the other hand, *Sensei* does not see it precisely in the same way. This is especially true if we consider that his own uncle is trying to convince him to marry his own cousin.

Although he rejects, it is made clear later on that his rejection of his cousin does not have anything to do with age, but rather with the fact that he does not find her to be attractive in that sense. He does not see her as a possible couple but rather as his sister or good friend. It is later seen that *Sensei* is willing to get married regardless of the age, as long as he is truly in love with the person. The last assertion can be perfectly exemplify by the ensuing battle between the two friends, *Sensei* and *K*, in which the final chapter focuses. The two friends are still university students when they fall in love with the same young lady. *Sensei* expresses how much he wants to marry the young girl and how he then ask her mother for permission to do so, "I want to marry Ojosan” (Soseki, Natsume. *Kokoro*, 3). He goes later on to marry her, soon after graduation. This shows that many people from older generations were willing to marry early in life as oppose to the newer generation.

These were changes with which both generations, especially older ones, had to deal in a time of turmoil and drastic changes experienced by the Japanese society.

Works Cited

Soseki, Natsume. *Kokoro*. Chicago: Regnery Gateway, 1957. 21 Jan. 2000.

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