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Special Feature Article

A Cat That Became a Turning Point for Natsume Sōseki: Focus on How to Live with Neurasthenia and Persecutory Insanity

Shinichiro Tanaka^{1,2}

1 Department of Psychiatry, Dokkyo Medical University Saitama Medical Center

2 Toranomom Yamashita Mental Clinic

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Abstract

Natsume Sōseki (1867-1916) was a great wordsmith in Japan, known for his most popular novels *Kokoro*, *Botchan*, and *I Am a Cat*. Pathographic studies of Sōseki have speculated possible psychiatric diagnoses, including schizophrenia, manic-depressive illness, neurosis, “sensitiver Beziehungswahn” (paranoia sensitiva), depressive-paranoid syndrome, borderline case, and social-phobic paranoia, and so on. These studies were conducted from a pathogenetic perspective.

However, the field of Sōseki studies has entered into a new phase, since the centennial anniversary of his death. Chiaki Ishihara, a scholar of Japanese literature, has developed some arguments, in which he rereads the original text of Sōseki’s novels from the position of three types of readers, as follows: 1) readers of that period, 2) readers slightly after Sōseki’s time who he could write for, and 3) readers of the present day who Sōseki could not write for.

In reference to Ishihara’s studies, this author reconsidered the text of Sōseki’s first novel, *I Am a Cat* (1905-1906), focusing on life and death of the cat through whom Sōseki expressed and channeled his loneliness, and on how to live with neurasthenia and persecutory insanity, from a salutogenic perspective.

Keywords : I Am a Cat, Natsume Sōseki, pathography, salutogenesis, salutography

Introduction: A New Phase in Sōseki Studies

By the centennial anniversary of his birth, Natsume Sōseki (1867-1916) was already the subject of several pathographical studies, produced using traditional diagnostic methods, that advanced speculations on the novelist's psychopathological profile, with suggested diagnoses including schizophrenia, manic-depressive illness, neurosis, "sensitiver Beziehungswahn" (paranoia sensitiva), depressive-paranoid syndrome, borderline case, and social-phobic paranoia.¹¹⁾ Although more recent studies based on operative diagnostic methods on the Western model have examined Sōseki from the perspective of narcissistic personality disorder, these studies are limited to explanations of the individual items listed, and are not as enlightening as anthropological studies. In any case, the pathographical literature to date has focused on the fact that Sōseki continued to write novels even as he suffered from stomach ulcers, neurasthenia, and persecutory insanity, and could be summed up as the study of the miraculous connection between illness and creativity. In other words, these studies have been conducted from a pathogenic perspective.

Since the centennial anniversary of his death, the field of Sōseki studies has entered a new phase. Chiaki Ishihara, a scholar of Japanese literature, has developed a new theory of Sōseki by rereading Sōseki's texts from the position of three kinds of readers, namely readers whose specific identity is clear, readers whose faces are somewhat recognizable, and readers whose faces remain completely featureless.^{2,3)} These three types of readers correspond, in other words, to readers who were contemporaries of Sōseki's day, future readers whom Sōseki might have imagined himself, and future readers from our own present day whom Sōseki could not have envisioned. Ishihara's series of essays could be described as an exercise in what Shigehiko Hasumi calls "sidestepping Sōseki" (i.e., focusing primarily on the text, rather than dwelling on the deified biography of the author).¹⁾

To briefly introduce a few of the works, for example, one of Sōseki's early masterpieces, *Botchan* (published April 1906), relates the story of the eponymous protagonist, the second son of a stubborn but evenhanded father ("The old man was hard-headed alright, but he wasn't the kind to play favorites...") struggling to

advance his career under the *ie* system instituted in the Meiji Civil Code. For the book's contemporary audience, the underlying theme would have been a critique of the authoritarianism inherent in Tokyo Imperial University. Citing an essay by Kazuo Ishii as a precedent, Ishihara once again draws attention to Sōseki's blatant discrimination against women, low education, and the countryside. This being the case, it could be argued that in failing to take their own position into consideration, present-day readers, whom Sōseki could not have envisioned, deliberately focus on the prejudices that were unconsciously shared by readers at the time to criticize Sōseki in a one-sided manner.

As another example, *Sanshirō* (published September through December 1908 as what would become the beginning of the first trilogy of novels), before it came to be known as "the tale of the innocent love between *Sanshirō* and *Mineko*" would have been "the tale of the failure of the relationship between *Nonomiya* and *Mineko*," especially for readers living in the *Hongō* cultural sphere at that time, for whom the relative positions of Tokyo Imperial University's *Shinjiike* pond, the campus buildings, and the setting sun would have been vividly pictured in their mind's eye. Referring to a diagram of the university campus prepared by Yasuo Shigematsu,⁹⁾ Ishihara interprets the scene by the pond as "Mineko using

Sanshirō to attract *Nonomiya*'s attentions." Moreover, he suggests that there may be an allusion here to the relationship between *Sanshirō* and *Miwata Omitsu*, as well as to the fact that *Sanshirō*'s marriage prospects are settled while he is back in his hometown.

Furthermore, the last novel of Sōseki's second trilogy, *Kokoro* (published from April to August 1914), was adopted as a material for high school textbooks for many years. In this way, for Sōseki's imagined future readership, it would have been a novel for conveying the Japanese ethic of "Sensei wa erai" (i.e., according high status to schoolteachers).¹⁰⁾ Today, however, when high schools are no longer a site of higher education, it is possible that the reading of *Kokoro* has also changed. Drawing on an essay by Masakazu Yamazaki,¹²⁾ Ishihara points out that present-day readers whom Sōseki could not have envisioned would understand the Sensei character, who repeatedly refers to himself as a "lonely person" decided to commit suicide not out of a desire to atone to K, but out of his own sense of emptiness. This being the case, though the way we read it may change, "loneliness" could perhaps be said to be a motif that has been running through the hearts of Japanese people from the Meiji era to the present day.

In this paper, with reference to newer studies of Sōseki like the ones presented here, I discuss his novel *I Am a Cat*

(published from January 1905 to August 1906) from a “salutogenic” perspective focusing on health, rather than disease. Quotations from the novel are drawn from *Wagahai wa neko de aru*, translated by Aiko Itō and Graeme Wilson as *I Am a Cat: Three Volumes In One*, Tuttle Publishing, 2002.

I. Up to the Publication of *I Am a Cat*

Having returned to Japan from England in January 1903, Sōseki lodged briefly at his wife’s parents’ house in Ushigome Yarai-chō before moving to Sendagi-chō, Hongō-ku, with his wife and children in March of that year. At the time, Sōseki was 37 years old, his wife Kyōko was 27, his eldest daughter Fudeko was 5, and his younger daughter Tsuneko was 3. The area, located in Tokyo’s hilly residential district, was surrounded by woods and situated close to a small asylum, a hog farm, and the Ikubunkan Junior High School.⁷⁾

During his time in Sendagi, Sōseki aggravated his neurasthenia, which had already been made worse during his reclusive student life overseas. He was prone to tantrums during which he would throw things – once even striking his eldest daughter who was standing beside a brazier – and also seemed to have a persecutory delusion about the neighborhood. These facts are well known, as is the anecdote of how he was

diagnosed by Shuzō Kure (1865–1932), a professor at Tokyo Imperial University’s Medical College to whom he had been referred by his family doctor Shirō Amako, as suffering from “a kind of psychosis called persecutory insanity.”⁸⁾ Nevertheless, Sōseki devoted himself to his job as an English teacher, lecturing 6 hours a week at Tokyo Imperial University (for which he received an annual salary of 800 yen) and 20 hours a week at the First Higher School (with an annual salary of 700 yen). According to his wife Kyōko, “he seemed to be writing lecture notes and studying all the time.”⁸⁾ Sōseki admitted to a friend that “my nerves are probably not cut out for school,” but based on Kōki Kawashima’s meticulous study,⁵⁾ at least objectively, it seems that Sōseki must have been a sincere educator.

It was while he was teaching that, at the end of 1904, Sōseki composed *Neko-den* (“A Cat’s Story”) at the urging of Takahama Kyoshi, then the editor-in-chief of the haiku magazine *Hototogisu* (“Lesser Cuckoo”). The story was modeled on a black cat that had insinuated itself into the Natsume household sometime in late June earlier that year, always returning no matter how many times it was chased off. The text was read aloud by Kyoshi at a meeting of the Yamakai reading group held in the former residence of Masaoka Shiki, where it was met with acclaim by those attending, and

its serialization as *I Am a Cat* commenced in the January 1905 issue of *Hototogisu*. Let us take a look at the opening.

I am a cat. As yet I have no name. I've no idea where I was born. All I remember is that I was miaowing in a dampish dark place when, for the first time, I saw a human being. This human being, I heard afterwards, was a member of the most ferocious human species; a shosei, ... (Volume One, Chapter I, 3)

At that time, it was customary to read texts aloud, rather than merely with the eyes. The opening lines in Japanese contain the verbs *dearu*, *nai*, *naite*, *mita*, *kiku* (“am,” “have no,” “miaowing,” “saw,” and “heard”). Along with several adverbs used for effect, these give the sentence a rhythm that even today’s readers can read aloud.

The protagonist of the work is Sōseki’s alter ego, the English teacher Mr. Sneaze (Chinno Kushami in the original Japanese). However, it is really the nameless cat who is the protagonist, and Sōseki can also be said to have projected himself onto the cat, who observes human beings with penetrating insight. According to Yōichi Komori,⁶ the abandoned cat is superimposed on his upbringing as Kin’nosuke Natsume, the child sent out for adoption at an early age to the Shiobara family.

Using a method of sketching, Sōseki

produced humorous caricatures of himself, his family, and the people around him. As the series lengthened, Sōseki focused on the critique of civilization as a means of relieving his depression. The book was completed with Chapter 11, which appeared in the August 1906 issue of *Hototogisu*, and it is safe to assume that the audience Sōseki had in mind at the time was limited to readers then living in the Hongō cultural sphere. Incidentally, Sōseki wrote in the preface to the middle volume that “‘Cat’ is the first work to bring me fame. While being famous is not much to boast about, it may be appropriate to send this work underground to the deceased, who encouraged me implicitly in *Bokujū Itteki* (A Drop of Ink).” It can thus be confirmed that *I Am a Cat* was informed by his friendship with the late Masaoka Shiki during the latter’s lifetime.

II. Life and Death, Entrusted to a Cat

Here, riding the current of the new phase of Sōseki studies mentioned above, let us consider how modern readers who “sidestep Sōseki” should understand what it means for life and death to be entrusted to a cat.

Having been abandoned by the shosei and picked up by Mr. Sneaze, the cat keeps a surreptitious eye on the life of the household, listening in on conversations during visits by the “hermits in a peaceful reign” – who include the aesthete

Waverhouse, the physicist Coldmoon, the philosopher Singleman Kidd, and Beauchamp Blowlamp, a poet of the new style – and then, by means of “mind-reading,” giving precise description of their thoughts, which are reported to the reader along with sarcastic and self-serving commentary.

Though they adopt a nonchalant attitude, keeping themselves aloof from the crowd, segregated like so many snake-gourds swayed lightly by the wind, in reality they, too, are shaken by just the same greed and worldly ambition as their fellow men. The urge to compete and their anxiety to win are revealed flickeringly in their everyday conversation, and only a hair's breadth separates them from the Philistines whom they spent their idle days denouncing. They are all animals from the same den. Which fact, from a feline viewpoint, is infinitely regrettable. Their only moderately redeeming feature is that their speech and conduct are less tediously uninventive than those of less subtle creatures. (Volume One, Chapter II, 66)

My master, interpreting that silence as an admission of defeat, looks uncommonly pleased with himself. But in proportion to my master's self-elation, Waverhouse's assessment of the wretched man has dropped. In Waverhouse's view my master's fat-headed obstinacy has considerably lowered his value as a man.

But in my master's view his firmness of mind has, by a corresponding amount, lifted him above the level of such piffers as poor Waverhouse. Such topsyturveydoms are not unusual in this imperfect world. A man who sees himself as magnified by his display of determination is, in fact, diminished in the public estimation by that demonstration of his crass willfulness. The strange thing is that, to his dying day, the mulish bigot regards his dull opiniatrey as somehow meritorious, a characteristic worthy to be honored. He never realizes that he has made himself a despised laughing stock, and that sensible people want nothing more to do with him. He has, in fact, achieved happiness. I understand that such joy, the wallowing well-being of a pig in its sty, is even called pig's happiness. (Volume Three, Chapter II, 345)

Afterwards, in the final chapter (Volume Three, Chapter IV, 400-470), Mr. Sneaze, Waverhouse, Coldmoon, Singleman, and Beauchamp gather together, and after listening to Coldmoon's verbose and roundabout story about his violin, Mr. Sneaze begins speaking of “the heightened self-awareness of our contemporaries,” and the group enters into a collective rant that touches on the marriage system, parent-child relationships, neurasthenia, and suicide, among other matters. At length, the party

is joined by Tatara Sampei, bringing some bottles of beer. When the party was over, the cat attains enlightenment with the following analysis of human nature.

If one tapped the deep bottom of the hearts of these seemingly lighthearted people, it would give a somewhat sad sound. Though Singleman behaves as though enlightenment had made him a familiar or the skies, his feet still shuffle, earthbound, through this world. The world of Waverhouse, though it may be easy-going, is not the dreamworld of those painted landscapes which he loves. That winsome donzel Coldmoon, having at last stopped polishing his little globes of glass, has fetched from his far home province a bridge to cheer his days. Which is pleasant and quite normal, but the sad fact is that long-continued, pleasant normality becomes a bore. Beauchamp too, however golden-hearted he is now, will have come in ten years' time to realize the folly of giving away for nothing those new-style poems that are the essence of his heart. As far Sampei, I find it difficult to judge whether he'll finish up on top of the pile or down the drain, but I'd like to think he'll manage to live his life out proud and happy in the ability to souse his acquaintance in champagne. Suzuki will remain the same eternal groveling creeper. Grovelers get covered in mud, but, even so be-sharned, he'll manage better than those cannot creep at all. (Volume Three,

Chapter IV, 466)

My master, sooner or later, will die of his dyspepsia. Old man Goldfield is already doomed by his greed. The autumn leaves have mostly fallen. All that has life must lose it. Since there seems so little point in living, perhaps those who die young are the only creatures wise. If one heeds the sages who assembled here today, mankind has already sentenced itself to extinction by suicide. If we don't watch out, even cats may find their individualities developing along the lethal crushing pattern forecast for these two-legged loons. It's an appalling prospect. (Volume Three, Chapter IV, 467)

At that, feeling depression weighing on him, the cat guzzles two glasses of beer, whereupon, in a drunken stupor, he falls into a large jar of water and drowns. It is an accidental suicide, but from the fact that the cat makes the decision to "give up" its "senseless struggle against nature," arguably suggests that the cat accepts its own death.

Incidentally, whence came the cat's downhearted pessimism? When Tortoiseshell, a "celebrated beauty in our district," catches a cold and dies at the home of her mistress, who teaches the two-stringed harp, the cat confesses that "Nowadays I haven't even energy to go out. Somehow life seems weary. I have become as indolent a cat as my master is an indolent human. I have come to

understand that it is only natural that people should so often explain my master's self-immurement in his study as the result of a love affair gone wrong." (Volume One, Chapter II, 69) Just so, our cat's pessimism may stem from its sense of loss and desolation, and of grief at its bereavement. This, as shown in the new reading of *Kokoro* referenced at the beginning of this paper, is the sense of "loneliness" that has pervaded the Japanese people from the Meiji period to the present day, and may perforce also be the loneliness felt by Sōseki himself at having ended up living as a recluse in his lodgings during his studies in England.

Sōseki lost his birth mother Chie at the age of 14, his eldest brother Daisuke and second-eldest brother Naonori one after the other to tuberculosis when he was 20, and then his sister-in-law Tose (the wife of his third-eldest brother Naokata) to acute morning sickness at the age of 24 and Shiki to tuberculosis while he was studying in England. In the preface to the middle volume of *I Am a Cat*, Sōseki expresses his regret over Shiki's death, confessing that "Poor Shiki waited daily for communication from me and drew his last breath still waiting in vain ... In the end, I killed him before I could dispel this misery for him."

Here, we must note that attitudes to life and death were quite different from those of today. In an age when medical technology has advanced by leaps and

bounds, people today might somehow deny illness and death, resisting them in order to cling to life. In this novel, Sōseki's alter ego, the cat, is keenly aware of the orientation toward death on the part of the "hermits in a peaceful reign," and then later, while drowning in the jar, evinces an attitude of acceptance even toward his own death. In this way, by accepting death without resistance in the midst of life, we can perhaps glimpse a salutogenic approach to living and dying that overcomes the dichotomies of health or illness and of life or death.

III. Dealing with Neurasthenia and Persecutory Insanity

Next, I would like to reconsider the relationship between Sōseki's illness and creativity that has been a fixture in analyses of *I Am a Cat* to date. That is, I would like to discuss the pathogenic interpretation that Sōseki hit on the idea of a cat's-eye perspective that lay "beyond good and evil" and that the act of writing of this work itself served to de-center (i.e., self-relativize) his own neurasthenia and delusions of persecution, thereby contributing to his self-healing.

Like its author Sōseki, the novel's protagonist, the obstinate Mr. Sneaze, is also described as suffering from neurasthenia and persecutory insanity, but it is inferred that he is at least somewhat aware of this fact, as follows.

Am I, perhaps, myself a little potty? They say that birds of a feather flock together and that like attracts like. If those old sayings are true, my admiration of a loony's thinking, well, let's say my generous sympathy for his writings, suggest that I myself must be a borderline case at least. Even if I'm not yet clearly certifiable, if I freely choose to live next door to a madman, there's an obvious risk that one fine day I might, perhaps unwittingly, topple across into his demented territory and end up, like my neighbor, completely around the bend. What a terrifying prospect! ... Perhaps I've already gone stark staring mad, and it's only because I've been lucky enough not to have hurt anybody or to have become an obvious public nuisance that I'm still allowed to quietly live on in this district as a private citizen. (Volume Three, Chapter II, 347)

However, Mr. Sneaze's thoughts then take a peculiar turn.

I've been comparing myself solely with lunatics, concentrating on the similarities between deranged persons and myself. That way I shall never escape from the atmosphere of lunacy. Obviously, I've tackled the problem in the wrong way. I've been accepting lunacy as the norm, and I've been measuring myself by the wonky standards of insanity. Inevitably, I've been coming to lunatic conclusions. If instead, I

now start measuring myself by the normal standards of a healthy person, perhaps I'll come to happier results. ... Perhaps our vaunted social organization is merely a kind of bear-garden, where lunatics gather together, grapple desperately, bicker and tussle with each other, call each other filthy names, tumble and sprawl all over each other in mindless muckiness. This agglomeration of lunatics thus becomes a living organism which, like cells, disintegrates and coalesces, crumbles again to nothing and again reintegrates. Is that not the actual nature of our marvelous human society? And within that organism, such few cells as are slightly sensible and exhibit symptoms of discretion inevitably prove a nuisance to the rest. So they find themselves confined in specially constructed lunatic asylums. It would follow that, objectively speaking, those locked up in mental homes are sane, while those careering around outside the walls are all as mad as hatters. An individual lunatic, so long as he's kept isolated, can be treated as a lunatic, but when lunatics get together and, so massed, acquire the strength of numbers, they also automatically acquire the sanity of numbers. Many lunatics are, by their maniness, healthy persons. (Volume Three, Chapter II, 347-349)

For readers then living in the Hongō cultural sphere, the content of Mr.

Sneaze's "twitchless meditation" would have been read with a keen awareness of the historical background of the coming into force of the Mental Patients' Custody Act in 1900, which enforced detention in private homes, and the recent opening of the Tokyo Prefectural Lunatic Asylum in Sugamo, next door. For the semi-invalid Mr. Sneaze, this decision to "start measuring myself by the normal standards of a healthy person" represents a turning point toward a salutogenic perspective. As he ponders this, Mr. Sneaze repeatedly oscillates between madness and health, and although he ultimately reaches a state of despair ("I just don't understand anything anymore"), this amounts to a de-centering from his paranoid state, and could thus be said to be a state of self-relativization.

However, it is interesting that the cat dismisses this by remarking, "If further evidence were needed, his drooling words confirm the dullness of his brain. Though he sports a fine moustache like Kaiser Bill, he is so preternaturally stupid that he can't even distinguish between a madman and a normal person." (Volume Three, Chapter II, 349) It is as though he is saying that pondering alone in his study with crossed arms is not enough to save him from becoming ill.

Neko-den was born at the Yamakai reading group held at the Shiki residence. Then, in October 1906, immediately following the completion of the

serialization of *I Am a Cat*, the "Thursday Club" began to convene at Sōseki's house. Hoping that "an individual lunatic, so long as he's kept isolated, can be treated as a lunatic, but when lunatics get together and, so massed, acquire the strength of numbers, they also automatically acquire the sanity of numbers. Many lunatics are, by their maniness, healthy persons," Sōseki likely found a *raison d'être* in having everyone come together to discuss current affairs.

By extending the scope of our discussion thus far, we may be able to find some hints for ways of dealing with neurasthenia and persecutory insanity. In other words, by emphasizing a salutogenic point of view, we might be able to say that Sōseki not only came to terms with his illness through the act of writing, but was also able to find support through his conversations with familiar readers, was able to escape from the reclusive habitus that had become ingrained in him during his overseas study in England, and establish his position as a semi-invalid in the context of that narrative space.

Conclusion: Prospects for Future Pathographical Studies of Sōseki

After a century of warfare, the time has come for today's readers, who are engaged in a shift of perspective from a pathogenic to a salutogenic perspective, to carry out pathographical research while relativizing even a genius like Natsume

Sōseki. In other words, as readers in the present day, it behooves us to break away from restricting our examination solely to the connections between illness and creativity. Instead, we have to consider the historical background against which readers of Sōseki's day read, felt, and thought about his novels, maintaining a separation between what Sōseki was aware of and that which lay beyond, so that we can examine these from multiple dimensions.

In this paper, in an attempt to approach this objective, I have introduced a new phase in Sōseki studies, and drawn on his novel *I Am a Cat* as a case study of "life and death entrusted to a cat" and "how to deal with neurasthenia and persecutory insanity," followed by a consideration of each of these from a salutogenic perspective. Although this work is Sōseki's debut novel, it is also an aggregate of the essence informing all of his subsequent novels, and it goes without saying that further examination will be necessary.

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