

Reading and Feeling with Japanese Literature

Light and Dark by Natsume Sōseki

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Introduction and Background

Esteemed scholar of English literature Suzanne Keen has famously argued that the novel invites the reader's empathy. The research project investigates Keen's argument in the case of Japanese literature. Research assistants read representative works of modern Japanese fiction in English translation, exploring how a Japanese author can invite the reader's sympathy/empathy.

Research assistants were assigned to read *Light and Dark* (1916) by Natsume Sōseki, *The Makioka Sisters* (1948) by Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, and *Fires on the Plain* (1952) by Ōoka Shōhei. The team kept a digital reading log, where research assistants typed out passages from the text that fit the literature review criteria, learning valuable proper citation skills in the process.

The excerpts reproduced on this poster are our data, illustrating how the Japanese author succeeds in inviting sympathy/empathy. During meetings with research mentor Dr. Mewhinney, research assistants sought to figure out what rhetorical devices and literary techniques the Japanese author employs to invite sympathy/empathy from the reader.

Methods

The purpose of the project is two fold: To explore how readers can feel sympathy/empathy through the process of reading literature, and to learn about the current state of this field of research on reader response. The list of books students read:

- *Empathy the Novel* by Suzanne Keen.
- *Light and Dark* (1916) by Natsume Sōseki.
- *The Makioka Sisters* (1948) by Tanizaki Jun'ichirō.
- *Fires on the Plain* (1952) by Ōoka Shōhei.

Students then created a reading log in which they wrote down their thoughts about the novel and what elements evoked sympathy/empathy.

Elements recorded:

- Environmental imagery and how it reflects the mood or feelings of the characters
- Human loss and how the characters mourned these losses
- Forms of renewal
- Descriptions of internal thoughts
- Emotional and cognitive relatability

Every two weeks research assistants met with the research mentor to discuss and reflect on the novel.

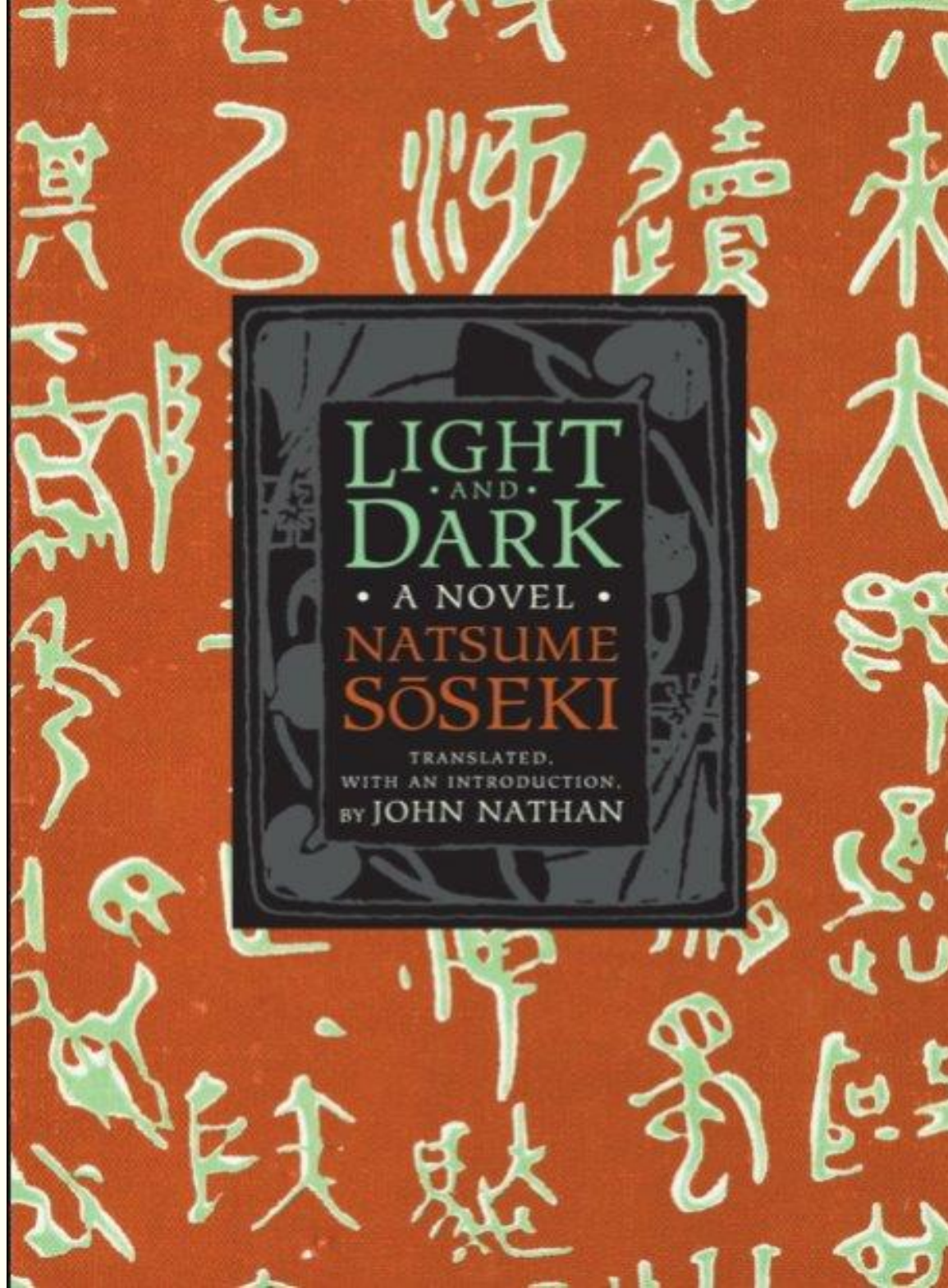
Resources (Citations)

Keen, Suzanne. *Empathy and the Novel*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Natsume, Sōseki. *Light and Dark: A Novel*. Translated by John Nathan. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013. Originally published as *Meian* (1916).

Ōoka, Shōhei. *Fires on the Plain: A Novel*. Translated by Ivan Morris. Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 2001. Originally published as *Nobi* (1952).

Tanizaki, Jun'ichirō. *The Makioka Sisters*. Translated by Edward G. Seidensticker. New York: Vintage Books, 1995. Originally published as *Sasameyuki* (1948).



Set in early 20th-century Japan, *Light and Dark* follows the story of a married couple, Tsuda and O-Nobu, whose lives are deeply intertwined with issues of self-doubt, love, guilt, and moral conflict.

The central theme of the book revolves around the concept of "light" and "dark," both in the literal and metaphorical senses. It can be argued that the light symbolizes O-Nobu and the characteristics of hope, clarity, and a certain level of truth, while the dark represents Tsuda and the characteristics of confusion, despair, and the unknown.

The novel focuses on the inner turmoil of individuals who are caught between personal aspirations, moral dilemmas, and the expectations placed upon them by society and their relationships.

Tsuda's internal struggles lead him to question his worthiness and to consider his relationship with O-Nobu as both a source of joy and torment. O-Nobu, on the other hand, embodies the ideal of the self-sacrificing woman, but her own insecurities and the societal pressures of her time shape her perceptions and reactions, making her a complex and nuanced character.

Author Methods for Invoking Reader Empathy (Results)

Readers feel sympathy/empathy for fictional characters through Sōseki's conveying of the internal emotional conflicts of his characters, allowing the reader to deeply connect with their inner struggles.

Narration

[1] Unexpectedly, O-Nobu found herself thinking about Tsuda as a self-centered man. Despite the fact that she extended to him from morning to night what she intended to be the fullest extent of kindness and consideration she was capable of, was there no limit to the sacrifice her husband required?" (*Light and Dark*, pg. 112)

- O-Nobu's reflective thoughts about her relationship with Tsuda show her sense of frustration and exhaustion. The passage where O-Nobu questions the sacrifices she has made for her husband directly exposes her emotional state. This narration invites the reader into her psyche, showcasing her disappointment and the endless emotional labor she endures.
- The pain she feels is evident through the phrasing, emphasizing how deeply she has been giving yet receiving so little in return. This creates a powerful sense of empathy for O-Nobu, as many can relate to the experience of feeling overlooked despite their best efforts.

[2] Before he had determined that the image was himself, he was assailed by the feeling that he was looking at his own ghost. Horrified, he resisted." (*Light and Dark*, pg. 388)

- Similarly, Tsuda's existential crisis and self-doubt are laid bare through direct reflection. In this passage where Tsuda confronts his own image, Sōseki's diction reveal Tsuda's unease: By giving the reader direct access to Tsuda's thoughts, Sōseki portrays his vulnerability and self-consciousness, which humanizes him and makes his emotional struggles more relatable.
- This direct insight into the characters' minds allows the reader to engage with their inner turmoil, fostering empathy for their struggles.

Setting

[1] She was in a large theater, surrounded by a crowd, but it seemed as though she were utterly alone. All the applause, all the noise of the audience, made no difference. She stood there as if in a dream, where not even the faintest echo of a sound could reach her." (*Light and Dark*, pg. 111)

- In *Light and Dark*, Sōseki uses the theater as a powerful metaphor for O-Nobu's emotional state, emphasizing the contrast between public visibility and private isolation. While the theater is a space filled with people, representing public attention, O-Nobu's emotional world is one of deep loneliness. Despite being surrounded by others, she feels profoundly misunderstood by her husband, Tsuda.

[2] As with a person who traverses the dark and suddenly emerges into the light, O-Nobu's eyes opened. The awareness that she was about to move from a far corner into the living pattern in front of her, to become a part of it, her every gesture and action woven into its fabric, rose distinctly through her nervousness." (*Light and Dark*, pg. 109)

- In the theater, O-Nobu is seen by others, but her inner turmoil goes unnoticed. The setting mirrors her role as a wife, where she performs her duties without recognition, much like an actor on stage, playing a part that others don't fully understand.
- O-Nobu's efforts to be the "ideal" wife—sacrificing herself without acknowledgment—reflect the unappreciated labor of an actor performing for an indifferent audience. Sōseki effectively uses this setting to convey O-Nobu's emotional isolation, allowing readers to empathize with her struggle of being unseen, even in the midst of a public life.
- The metaphor reinforces the disconnect between her external appearance and her internal suffering, deepening the reader's empathy for her emotional isolation despite being physically surrounded by others.

Conclusion

Authors can invoke sympathy/empathy in readers through various strategies, such as the use of narration and setting. These techniques work together to evoke powerful emotional responses, thereby deepening the reader's sense of sympathy/empathy. Our team alongside Dr. Mewhinney will continue to read more Japanese literature in English translation. For his ongoing project, Dr. Mewhinney will use our feedback regarding the ways literature invites an emotional response from the reader. The data we provide regarding how educated students—not Japanese scholars—interpret and receive Japanese fiction will advance Dr. Mewhinney's research.