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The Significance of First-Person Perspective in *Kokoro*

There are many different perspectives from which to tell a story, and each one can significantly alter the effects of the story it tells. In Natsume Soseki's novel, *Kokoro*, he chooses to use first-person perspective. This stands out because this type of perspective isn't found as commonly in older Japanese literature as it is in western literature. Considering the modern nature of first-person perspective in Japanese literature, and Soseki's background as a professor of English literature, the choice to use first-person perspective in *Kokoro* is deliberate and stands out within the time of its publication. The novel follows the story of an unnamed narrator, a college student who develops an interest in a man known only as "Sensei". Sensei is described as a misanthrope who vaguely alludes to a troubled past. The narrator does his best to befriend Sensei, despite Sensei's initial resistance, and becomes intensely curious in Sensei's past. Over time, the two become close. However, after the narrator returns home to visit his seriously ill father, he receives a letter from Sensei detailing his past and informing the narrator of his intent to commit suicide. The novel *Kokoro* is very popular both within Japan and overseas. While the story itself is interesting, the point of view it is written from makes it stand out amongst other works of its time. This point of view has specific effects on the reader's experience that cannot necessarily be achieved with other points of view, such as suspense, increased emotional

attachment to the characters, and better immersion into the story. The use of first-person perspective in Natsume Soseki's *Kokoro* and its effects on readers is vital to the popularity of the novel.

One of arguably the most important roles of first-person narrative in *Kokoro* is the ability to keep readers engaged through the use of mystery and suspense. The narrator only has a limited amount of information about Sensei, both what he has been able to gather through observation and what he has heard second-hand through those around Sensei. For example, one person he frequently gets information about Sensei from is Sensei's wife. The wife, whose name is not stated, informs the narrator that Sensei was not always the way he is presently. When the narrator asks what he used to be like, she responds, "The kind of person you wish him to be, the kind of person I wish him to be... There was hope and strength in him then" (Soseki, 38). This confirms to both the narrator and the reader that there was an event, or perhaps multiple events, that caused a dramatic shift in Sensei's personality. The narrator and the reader both get curious, and this curiosity is what drives both the narrator and the reader to continue trying to learn more about Sensei. Furthermore, it is clear that the narrator admires Sensei, but for most of the story he doesn't know much about who Sensei truly is. What makes this novel so intriguing is the fact that not only is the reader aware of how little the narrator knows about Sensei, but the narrator himself also makes note of it multiple times throughout the story. This keeps both the narrator and the reader interested in solving the puzzle of what made Sensei into the person he is today. If the novel were to be written from a third-person perspective, the reader would already know Sensei's thoughts and motivations, even if the narrator did not. This would leave no mystery to be solved and would lessen the motivation for some readers to continue reading. Additionally, since the story is recounted by the narrator as a memory rather than a presently occurring event,

the narrator often chooses to withhold information. There are multiple times throughout the novel that the narrator knows more than the reader yet tells the story in the order that he experienced rather than with the full context of hindsight. The slow reveal of each piece of the puzzle keeps readers attention in a way that a third-person perspective may not be able to. This element of suspense created by the use of first-person perspective is a large part of what makes *Kokoro* so well liked.

In addition to suspense, another important component to keeping the reader's attention is the use of empathy. If readers can see themselves within the narrator and empathize with him, they can form a sort of attachment to him. This attachment leads readers to be more invested in what happens in the narrator's life and his personal development. Many of the readers of this novel are college students, just like the narrator. They can relate to instances such as the narrator's conversation with his father in which he tries to explain that it's not as easy to find jobs as it used to be, which is a feeling many college and university students can relate to. The narrator's father responds, "You mustn't blame us if we now expect you to be financially independent. It's rather embarrassing, you know, not to have an answer when I am asked 'Now that your younger son has graduated, what is he going to do?'" (Soseki, 93) This is another relatable topic for student readers, as many may feel similar pressure from their parents. While it is definitely possible for readers to empathize with characters in stories written from the third-person perspective, the first-person perspective requires the reader to more closely examine the thought processes behind the narrator's behavior. This means that even if the narrator disagrees with the narrator's thoughts or actions, they can still see the exact process that led the narrator to the conclusion they arrived at. For example, many of the actions from the narrator of *Kokoro* can be viewed as immature or petty, such as when he went out of his way to provoke Sensei. The

narrator states, “I became spiteful. I wanted to say something that would humiliate him” (Soseki, 64). Nonetheless, readers get an inside view into what exactly made him think to behave that way. Additionally, readers are able to get a closer look at the importance of Sensei in the narrator’s life from the narrator’s own point of view. This allows readers to more fully sympathize with the narrator when, at the end of the novel, the narrator learns of Sensei’s plan to commit suicide. This emotional connection between the reader and narrator, the extent of which is made possible by the choice to use first-person perspective, is part of what makes the novel so popular.

Finally, the use of first-person perspective allows the reader to be more fully immersed in the story. The retrospective telling of the story by the narrator not only allows the reader to experience the events through the eyes of the narrator himself but also means that the reader learns information in the order that the narrator deems important. While a story written in the third-person perspective would likely present information either in a purely chronological order or in the order the author decides to present it, the order from a first-person perspective is given by one of the characters themselves. This means that the narrating character themselves can influence the emotions of the reader and produce the same feelings that the character had at any given time. For example, when the narrator is back home visiting his father, he often thinks about Sensei. In one such instance, the narrator looks back and adds information he did not have at the time. He says, “I could not know then that this light too would be swallowed up by the silent whirlpool. I could not know that very soon, this light would be snuffed out, and that I would be left in a world of total darkness” (Soseki, 92). The light he describes is Sensei’s house, and more importantly Sensei’s existence itself. The narrator, who is telling the entire story retrospectively, already knows about Sensei’s plan to commit suicide. This allows him to offer context and

insight to the reader that he did not have during the events he describes, such as the fact that Sensei's "light" would cease to exist. This adds to the reader's immersion by including not only context about current events, but important emotional context for events yet to come. The narrator's foreboding comments give the reader a sense of unease and a feeling that something is about to go wrong, which causes the reader to be further invested and immersed. If the novel were to have been written in the third-person point of view, the same feeling of anxiety would not have been achieved as easily. In novels written in the third-person perspective, the reader is sometimes further removed from the story. This means that emotions such as unease do not get across as effectively, thus taking away from the immersion. The use of first-person perspective is extremely important to the immersion the reader experiences and thus helps lead to the popularity of the novel.

Natsume Soseki's use of first-person perspective in the novel *Kokoro* stood out for its time. While simply being unique is enough to give it some popularity, the novel's success is better explained by the effects that the first-person perspective narration has on readers. Use of this perspective creates suspense that keeps readers wanting to know more and solve the mystery. Withholding information about Sensei's past makes both the narrator and the readers curious, which motivates them to keep learning more about him. Additionally, by viewing the story through the eyes of the narrator himself, readers are able to form a bond with him that makes his experiences more meaningful. His relationship with Sensei has much more meaning when readers are shown why Sensei is important to the narrator rather than just being told why they should care. Finally, the use of first-person perspective in *Kokoro* creates a deeper, more immersive experience for readers. All these effects are due to Natsume Soseki's use of first-

person perspective, and thus *Kokoro* would not be as popular if it were written in a different perspective style.

Works Cited

Soseki, Natsume, and Edwin McClellan. *Kokoro*. Gateway Editions, 1996.