



The Symbol of Cats in Japanese Literature: From Folklore to the Absurd Novel "I am a Cat" by Natsume Soseki

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Abstract

In this study, we will explore the connection between Japanese culture and the symbol of the cat, starting from the earliest folkloric legends, to continue with the inclusion of this symbol in modern Japanese literature, more specifically in an iconic novel of its kind, such as Natsume Soseki's "I Am a Cat". In Japan, cats are revered for giving good luck and other positive results. The popular Japanese cat figurine maneki-neko (beckoning cat) is typically believed to bring such blessings. The figurine is often of a cat with its paw in an upright position as if beckoning. The best known maneki-neko legend is believed to date from the 17th century. Under the influence of folklore legends, the figure of the cat, with all its symbolic meanings, is widely encountered in Japanese literature as well. The most representative work in this regard is the novel "I am a cat", written more than a century ago, during the Meiji era, by Natsume Soseki. We will observe how in this book; the cat appears as a philosophical narrator, how wisdom is represented through a pet, and also analyse the paradox of the normality of animals and the absurdity of humans. By using the biographical method, we will also analyse how Soseki has split himself into the two main characters of the book, Professor Kushami and the cat.

Keywords: Natsume Soseki, cat, folklore, modern literature, Japanese

1. Introduction

The association of Japanese culture with cats started a long time ago, around the middle of the 6th century, when the first cats came to Japan from China. Since then, they have inspired Japanese artists and writers for generations.

In Japan, cats are revered for giving good luck and other positive results. The popular Japanese cat figurine *maneki-neko* (beckoning cat) is typically believed to bring such blessings. The figurine is often of a cat with its paw in an upright position as if beckoning. It is mostly found at the entrance of shops, restaurants, and other business establishments; it is believed that it brings good luck to employees and customers. We recall here that the globally known animated character, Hello Kitty, so loved by children, especially little girls, originates from Japan. Hello Kitty was created in Japan in the mid-70s, inspired by the *maneki-neko*.

"In Japanese folklore, cats have protective powers and are considered lucky charm. There are a number of legends that explain the origin of *maneki-neko*. Perhaps the best known story of this kind dates from the 17th century. It tells of an impoverished monk who cared for his white cat, even while the Gotokuji Buddhist temple he occupied was falling into ruin. When he eventually told his feline companion that he would need to find alternative lodging, the loyal cat chose to stay, sitting at the temple gates.

One day, a wealthy feudal lord, Li Naotaka, was passing by when a huge thunderstorm erupted. The lord sheltered under a nearby tree. While waiting for the storm to pass he spotted the white cat at the temple gates beckoning him to come over. Curious, Li stood up and walked over to the cat. At that precise moment a huge bolt of lightning struck the tree, causing it to fall, exactly where, moments before, Li had been standing.

To express his gratitude for saving his life, Li rescued the monk's temple from ruin. The Gotokuji temple still exists and is decorated with a myriad of white beckoning cats in honour of the lucky cat that saved Li Naotaka's life and his master's temple." (Morgan, 2024)

Under the influence of folklore legends, the figure of the cat, with all its symbolic meanings, is widely encountered in Japanese literature as well. The most representative work in this regard is the novel "I am a cat", written more than a century ago by Natsume Soseki, where the events are narrated from the point of view of the cat of the house.

1.1 Meiji era - the background of Soseki's novel

In researching the book and the author, we often come across the phrase Meiji era, the era in which the book was written but also which influenced the book. This era of Japanese history extended from October 23, 1868 to July 30, 1912; it was the first half of the Empire of Japan, when the Japanese people moved from being an isolated feudal society at risk of colonization by Western powers to the new paradigm of a modern, industrialized nation state and emergent great power, influenced by Western scientific, technological, philosophical, political, legal, and aesthetic ideas.

Thus, in this period, modernism begins in Japanese literature. It is Natsume Soseki who is the initiator of modernism in Japanese literature, and the lifespan of his short 49-year life (1867-1916) almost coincides with the Meiji era. "Soseki was among the few intellectuals who were keenly aware of the superficial nature of the society that had resulted from hurried modernisation. This realisation led him to write a series of novels in which Meiji intellectuals suffer from the ills of modern Japanese society, such as egoism and human isolation and the first of them is 'I am a cat'." (Fuchuci, 1993, p. 469)

1.2 The cat, the philosophical narrator; wisdom through the animal

I am a cat is the story of a slice of human everyday life seen through the eyes of a pet who is a cat. Why an animal does narrate to people? Why does a no-human narrate to human? To begin with, I would say that judging from what we know about the history of the publication of this work, I believe that this form of narration initially started as a detail that gives originality.

Neko, as we refer to this work in short, was first published in the January 1905 edition of Hoto-to-gisu, ("Lesser Cuckoo") literary magazine that was presided by haiku poet Masaoka Shiki. As you know, the story is told from the cat's viewpoint, and the readers had never seen anything like it. It was received so well that the magazine asked Soseki to write more episodes. It went on for a total of eleven of the magazine, which comprise the chapters of the novel as we see today (see: Hoto-to-gisu, 1905-1906).

The book starts with the phrase: *I'm a cat. I don't have a name yet* (Soseki, 2021, p. 5). Soseki's cat has no name. All the cats around him have names, only the professor's cat doesn't. Anonymity gives majesty to his thoughts; a name would make him ordinary. There is a paradox here; the people of the house do not give him a name because they do not consider him, while to the reader a name would make him an ordinary cat.

Then the narration continues with the description of the cat's adventures, until he "gets stuck" in a house, and goes on with the description of the house, the neighbourhood, the people who live in the house and who visit it. The cat comes to this conclusion about humans: they are miserable creatures in the eyes of a cat. I think this is the main reason why this type of narrator was chosen, he is considered "above human beings".

He is a philosopher, a thinker, he does not speak, he does not act, but he is silent, because silence is the virtue of the wise, but also because he is negligible in the environment where he lives. He seems to stand above reality, especially in the first 2 chapters, as if he is narrating from a higher level, but this monotonous reality of vanity weighs heavily and inadvertently the cat becomes a part of it.

1.3 Author - characters relationships

Soseki has split himself into the two main characters of the book, Professor Kushami and the cat. As we said above, the cat has been wandering around looking for food and accidentally entered a home kitchen. He neither chose nor did they choose him. By chance he stopped there; by chance the owner of the house is a high school teacher.

At first, we have the impression that the cat has entered a house of intellectuals, rich of the dignity that knowledge gives, but on the contrary, we immediately discover that the English professor is all superficial: he buys books and does not read them; he enters the studio every afternoon and instead of working he sleeps; he tries to write poetry, paint, translate, but not only does he not succeed, but he abandons these tendencies very quickly. The professor is an alter ego of the author, he has some of his characteristics, they are similar in that they are both English teachers, in their interest in becoming writers, in poor health and stomach problems, in being part of the middle class, etc.

The mockery that the author makes of the main character, Kushami, is a self-irony, through which he conveys his funny side, as a former English teacher, as an academic, as a writer. As a reader, being part of the academia in the field of literature, I also felt part of this self-irony.

There are many similarities between the author and the character of Kushami, but also similarities between the author and the cat, e.g. the adoption.

“Sōseki began his life as an unwanted child, born to his mother late in her life, forty years old and his father then fifty-three. When he was born, he already had five siblings. Having five children and a toddler had created family insecurity and was in some ways a disgrace to the Natsume family. A childless couple adopted him in 1868 and raised him until the age of nine, when the couple divorced. He returned to his biological family and was welcomed by his mother although regarded as a nuisance by his father. His mother died when he was fourteen, and his two eldest brothers died in 1887, intensifying his sense of insecurity” (McClellan, 2004). The cat further resembles him in his entire deep, academic-level musings and judgments, but the choice of a cat for the main character has a double meaning since Sōseki was, in fact, a stray kitten himself.

1.4 The normality of animals and the absurdity of humans ¹

All the human characters in the novel are almost the same, while the animal characters, cats, are diverse. In addition to the cat narrator, other cat characters appear in the book, such as Rickshaw Blacky, the coachman's pet, a tough, crude cat, or Tortoiseshell, a lady cat which belongs to a rich family. What might be considered interesting events for the reader occurs in the animal world, e.g. the cat's romance with the sweet lady cat.

In the meantime, let's take a look at what do represent some of the characters who stand in front of the cat and are observed by him. First we should make a parenthesis to clarify that their names in the original Japanese text are all characteristic names in the form of funny epithets corresponding to some trait or vice of the character. In the Albanian version of the novel they have not been translated, while in the English version they have been translated, as we will explain below:

Sneaze, the cat's master and a teacher (org. Professor Kushami). Purportedly a caricature of the author, Sneaze is the prototypical absent-minded professor: perpetually somewhat short of money, old-fashioned, awkward and even naive, often dyspeptic and sometimes irritable. He is married to a balding woman and has several children whom he mostly ignores.

Waverhouse, a show-off (org. Meitei). He invites himself into other people's houses, tells lies for fun and chatters constantly, to the impatience, befuddlement or amusement of those around him.

Coldmoon, a scientist and former student of Sneaze (org. Kangetsu). A good-looking young man, he falls in love with Opula Goldfield (org. Tomiko).

Compared to what happens in the animal world, these are all ridiculous characters that are driven by ego and live in vanity.

1.5 Death, the absurd end of the novel

Concerning serious things, like death, Soseki uses animals; otherwise for the comical ones he uses people. At the end of the book, the cat dies in an absurd way; he gets drunk and drowns in a basin. This death from drowning of the narrator and performer completes the frame of suffocating absurdity. The novel's ending does it all justice. It leaves the reader

¹ For character names translated in English see: Sōseki, Natsume. (2021). *I Am a Cat*. Zea Books. 10.32873/unl.dc.zea.1310.

questioning the cat's perspective in the first place, because of our nameless cat's senseless demise. *Through death I'm drifting slowly into peace. Only by dying can this divine quiescence be attained. I am thankful! I am thankful!* (Soseki, 2021, p. 679)- He concludes.

2. Conclusion

As observed in this article, the cat in Japanese literature is a multifaceted symbol, evolving from folklore to modern novels.

In folklore cats are often seen as bringers of good luck and fortune. The "maneki-neko" (beckoning cat) is a popular example, believed to attract customers and prosperity. They are also sometimes associated with supernatural powers and mystery.

The cat in Japanese literature is a rich and complex symbol. It embodies various meanings, from good fortune and mystery to social commentary and personal reflection. Its representation has evolved over time, reflecting changing societal values and literary trends.

In Natsume Soseki's novel, "I Am a Cat" the cat serves as a satirical observer of human society. The novel is a sharp critique of Meiji-era Japanese society. Soseki uses the cat's detached observations to expose the follies, hypocrisies, and anxieties of the rapidly modernizing nation. He satirizes the blind adoption of Western values, the struggles of the intellectual class, and the general sense of unease and transition.

The unnamed cat narrator is a particular literary device. Its outsider status allows for uninhibited commentary on human behaviour. The cat's lack of involvement in human affairs gives it a unique vantage point to analyse and critique the actions of those around it. Soseki's use of a cat as the narrator was a bold and innovative move. It allowed him to explore new perspectives and to challenge conventional narrative techniques. The novel's episodic structure and its blend of humour and social commentary also contribute to its literary significance.

The cat's alienation from human society reflects a broader sense of alienation felt by many Japanese during this period of rapid change. The novel explores the struggle to find one's place in a world undergoing transformation.

"I Am a Cat" captures the complexities of Japan's transition from a traditional society to a modern, industrialized nation. The novel highlights the clash between old and new values, the anxieties of progress, and the search for meaning in a changing world.

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