

The Magnitude of Mental Illnesses

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In *Kokoro*, by Natsume Soseki, the narrator gains interest in an older gentleman, who he calls Sensei, and he begins visiting him regularly, trying to understand his way of life that is so different from his own. The novel is structured in three parts, the first two have to do with the developing relationship between the narrator and Sensei. The narrator is a college student who becomes familiar with Sensei and his wife as he is attending school in Tokyo. After graduating, however, the narrator is forced to move back home to accompany his father who is close to death. The third part of the novel is dedicated to Sensei's life story and his reason for choosing to commit suicide. Natsume Soseki parallels the father's nearing death with Sensei's suicide to show how mental illness should not be marginalized and is just as destructive as a physical disease.

Soseki paints the development of the relationship between the narrator and the Sensei in a way that draws no attention to Sensei's mental health to represent the general population's ignorance towards mental health issues such as depression. It is very evident that Sensei suffers from depression. His lack of ambition and disregard for others, yet feeling guilty of the same disregard are very clear signs of depression. In Sensei's final letter to the narrator, in reference to him asking the narrator to return to Tokyo, forgetting about the narrator's father's decreasing health, he states, "You see, I am a inconsistent person...I am well aware of my failing. You must forgive me." Sensei could have just stated that this is an isolated event and apologize for it. Instead he generalizes it as part of his personality and another reason why he is an incompetent

person in his eyes. Sensei is well aware of his mental condition. He writes that “the development—or destruction—of a man’s body and mind depends upon external stimuli.” Sensei is not only referencing K in this passage but also himself. He feels as if his mind has already wasted away and that it is too late for him to return to his previous state. Even though Sensei’s mental illness is evident, his actions and attitude are mistaken for some sort of wisdom by the narrator. At a very obvious display of Sensei’s suicidal nature, the narrator comments “I remember Sensei saying, ‘Which of us will die first?’ And I thought: ‘How can anyone answer such a question? And if Sensei knew the answer, what would he do? What would his wife do, if she knew? Probably behave exactly as if they did not know.’” The narrator thinks the question is absurd and does not relate it to Sensei’s personality at all. The comment also suggests that even if the wife, having known Sensei much longer, knew that he was suffering from depression, wouldn’t acknowledge it or try to help him in some way. This shows how mental illnesses is dealt with during that time period, and even today. It is something not to be talked about openly and not acknowledged easily. Treatment of Sensei’s mental illness isn’t even in consideration.

The closeness of the impending deaths of Sensei and the narrator’s father begs readers to relate mental illnesses to physical ones. This is especially evident when the narrator first receives the letter and torn between staying by his father’s side and going to save Sensei. Before realizing that Sensei was talking about death, the narrator thinks “‘He is free now, but he will never be free again,’ and tried desperately to understand what the words meant; then all of a sudden I became uneasy...I heard my brother’s voice calling me from the sickroom. Frightened...I was prepared to learn that the end had come for my father.” After learning that his father is stable, the narrator returns and quickly skims the letter until the last page and reads that Sensei’s intention is to commit suicide, the narrator then quickly returns to his father’s room once again. This

juxtaposition between learning about Sensei's death and waiting for the father's death relates the two instances. Soseki is relating the same outcome from a physical illness and a mental illness. This emphasizes the magnitude of mental illnesses and implies the importance of treating both illnesses with equal importance.

In the end, neither deaths are confirmed and the readers are left to ponder the circumstances of both the father's death and Sensei's death. Sensei's unwillingness to do anything and feeling undeserving of everything goes beyond just guilt and into depression. In *Kokoro*, Soseki highlights two cases of depression, both of which end in suicide, in order to shine a light on mental illnesses and he compares it to a physical illness to show that there should not be a different in treatment between the two. Both mental and physical illnesses are equally harmful.