

What Makes Sensei Tick? A Freudian Perspective

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Often, a writer must be both artist and psychologist, not only creating characters but also bringing them to life, giving them personalities, conflicts, and neuroses that serve not only to advance the plot, but also to give the reader someone to identify with, and a way for the writer to convey his or her message. The theories of psychologist Sigmund Freud, as explained by him in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, may be used to explain the character Sensei's behavior in Natsume Soseki's novel, *Kokoro*. Freud's theories regarding the pleasure principle, aggression, and personality can shed some light on Sensei's behavior concerning Ojosan, the object of his affection, and K, whom he perceives as the obstacle between him and what he most desires. While marrying Ojosan seems at first to be what would ultimately make Sensei happy, his Freudian conflicts manifest themselves as inner struggles and self-contradictions that lead Sensei down a path of self-destruction which ultimately leaves him and Ojosan miserable.

Freud asserts that man's purpose in life is to seek and retain happiness, which can be characterized both by the absence of pain or the presence of pleasure. However, this happiness is up to man himself to find. Freud states that "all the regulations of the universe run counter to it ... the intention that man should be 'happy' is not included in the plan of 'Creation'" (Freud 25). So then, in order to be happy, man must search for a way to fulfill his internal needs, and even when happiness is attained, the experience is fleeting: "we can derive intense enjoyment only from a contrast and very little from a state of things" (Freud 26). The search for happiness, or what Freud calls the pleasure principle, is seen by Freud as a driving force behind much of man's behavior. This love

drive is called Eros, and the powerful desires that result from it can shed light on Sensei's willingness to do almost anything to gain the happiness he feels will come from marrying Ojosan, as discussed below.

Unhappiness, on the other hand, is much less elusive. Freud cites three principle sources of unhappiness: the human body, nature, and other people. The third source of unhappiness, relations with other people, is thought by Freud to be the most painful of the three (Freud 26). Interestingly, it is also the only one of the three that man can possibly have any control over: for the most part, he cannot control the workings of his body and what diseases he may contract, and he cannot control the forces of nature, but he can choose his friends. Therefore, it might be suggested that much of a person's motive for behaving a certain way towards others can be explained by his wish to keep from being hurt by other people.

The prospect of suffering does not appeal to anyone, and the idea that we might be able to control it may influence us to act a certain way. Rather than seeking happiness by entering into a relationship which may ultimately cause us pain, we may suppress that urge and choose instead to stay safely unattached. In this way, man (more specifically, Sensei himself) tries to find a middle ground between happiness and unhappiness. He convinces himself that although he has not reached the ultimate erotic happiness to be found in a love relationship, or even the happiness that can come from an aim-inhibited or more platonic relationship, he should count himself lucky to have escaped the unhappiness and suffering such a relationship may bring: "the pleasure principle itself, indeed, under the influence of the external world, changed into the more modest reality principle ... the task of avoiding suffering pushes that of obtaining pleasure into the

background” (Freud 26). This idea helps us to understand Sensei’s defense mechanism of self-isolation which keeps him from forming close relationships, even with those whom it would seem natural for him to trust.

Consider, then, Sensei’s behavior regarding Okusan, mother of the woman he loves. He desires Ojosan, and wants to ask her mother for her hand in marriage, but his past experience stops him. As a result of the deception and treachery of his uncle, Sensei is now reluctant to trust anyone, even those who have given him no reason to suspect that they have anything less than noble intentions. Fear of being hurt and deceived by Okusan makes Sensei reluctant to trust her, even if that trust would result in something that would bring him happiness: “I hated the idea of being enticed by Okusan to swallow her bait. No matter what happened, I vowed to myself, no one would ever dupe me as my uncle had done” (Soseki 159).

As the novel progresses, however, it becomes clear that another of Freud’s theories has come into play: that of aggression and its effect on personality. Freud asserts that there are three main components to a person’s personality: the id, which deals with instinctual desires; the superego, which is the aggressive moral part of man and which opposes the id; and the ego, which mediates between the desires of the id and the aggression of the superego. The superego acts as sort of a moral conscience, keeping us from doing things which we’ve learned would earn us society’s disapproval (Freud 84). Freud also sees man as being inherently aggressive, and believes he will seek to obtain whatever he desires unless something (for example, the superego) is there to stop him. This reality principle, called *Ananke*, is used to counterbalance the powerful influence of Eros.

This idea can be related to Sensei's later behavior where Ojosan is concerned. Initially, Sensei's conflict over whether or not to ask Okusan for her daughter's hand in marriage stems mainly from the fact that he doesn't know whether or not he can trust Okusan, and therefore this lack of trust, rather than the potential disapproval of society, keeps him from asking to marry Ojosan. Later, however, when Sensei's friend K confesses his love for Ojosan, Sensei's dilemma becomes a much more moral one. Regardless of whether or not he trusts Okusan, he now must struggle with himself to decide which he is more willing to risk: betraying his friend or losing the woman he loves. The instinctually-driven id naturally pushes Sensei to ask Okusan for her daughter before K can; but Sensei's superego, the societally created moral conscience that knows betraying K is wrong, keeps him from acting impulsively. Eventually, however, Sensei's id does overpower his superego, and he approaches Okusan to ask for permission to marry her daughter.

Sensei betrays K by asking to marry Ojosan even though he knows his friend is in love with her, but this is not the extent of his id-driven behavior. Additionally, Sensei cruelly uses K's own weaknesses and self-doubts against him when K approaches Sensei to ask for advice about resolving his own internal dilemma. Sensei uses their friendship toward his advantage: having been friends with K, he knows what his weaknesses are, and because Sensei knows K trusts him, his advice is that much more effective. When K asks Sensei for his "honest opinion," Sensei seizes the opportunity to simultaneously destroy both K's hope of a love relationship with Ojosan, and whatever self-confidence K may have left. When the conflicted K, in need of kind words and reassurance, tells Sensei that he "cannot bear this pain" (Soseki 213), Sensei says the thing that he knows

will hurt K most: “Anyone who has no spiritual aspirations is an idiot” (Soseki 214). Sensei’s cruel remark makes K even more painfully aware of the conflict within himself, and of the fact that it will never be resolved to his satisfaction. Sensei’s behavior in this instance clearly illustrates the inherent aggression Freud speaks of: on the surface, we seem nice and civilized, but given the right circumstances or when prevented with an obstacle to something our id desires, even the nicest and most civilized of us can become aggressive and devious. Sensei himself reiterates this point during a conversation he has with the narrator of *Kokoro*: “Under normal conditions, everybody is more or less good, or, at least, ordinary. But tempt them, and they may suddenly change. That is what is so frightening about men. One must always be on one’s guard” (Soseki 61). Sensei speaks as a man who has been both the betrayed and the betrayer.

After the id-driven betrayal of K’s trust, Sensei’s superego takes control again, manifesting itself in the form of extreme guilt: “I wanted to kneel before him and beg his forgiveness. It was a violent emotion that I felt then. I think that had K and I been alone in some wilderness, I would have listened to the cry of my conscience. But there were others in the house. I soon overcame the impulse of my natural self to be true to K” (Soseki 225). Although Sensei’s superego imposes feelings of guilt upon him, it is not quite strong enough to allow Sensei to make a spectacle of himself in front of other people. Later, after K’s suicide, Sensei is once again seized by the urge to confess and apologize, this time to Okusan: “I had the sudden urge to kneel down and blurt out my apology I was forced by my conscience to apologize against my will” (Soseki 232). Sensei’s guilty conscience causes him to blame himself for K’s suicide, and because he can no longer apologize to or ask forgiveness from K, he seeks to ease his guilt by

apologizing to someone else. His efforts are in vain, however; Okusan does not understand what K is apologizing for, and therefore the burden of his guilt remains.

For the rest of his life, Sensei is unable to ease his guilty conscience. Even events that should bring him extreme happiness, like his marriage to Ojosan, are soon overshadowed by his return to a life-long burden of guilt: “It seemed that my momentary contentment [in marrying Ojosan] led nowhere, except to a sorrowful future” (Soseki 236). Sensei’s attempts to run away from his unhappiness are reminiscent of Freud’s safeguards against it. “Having failed to bury myself alive among books, I tried for a while to forget myself by drowning my soul in saké I hoped that saké would bring at least momentary oblivion” (Soseki 238). Freud saw intoxication as being the most effective method of avoiding unhappiness, but also felt that in order to truly defend oneself, one must engage in voluntary isolation from the world: “Against the dreaded external world one can only defend oneself by some kind of turning away from it” (Freud 27). In this spirit, then, Sensei isolates himself completely, unable to form a close relationship with anyone, and justifies it to himself and the narrator in the following way: “I do not want your admiration now, because I do not want your insults in the future. I bear with my loneliness now, in order to avoid greater loneliness in the years ahead” (Soseki 30). Sensei’s fear of later, deeper pain caused by a relationship enables him to bear the present, seemingly lesser pain of the loneliness that comes from his self-isolation.

Sensei’s defense mechanism extends even to his relationship with his wife, the person whom he wants to love most but who also is the most vivid reminder of his past: “I was saddened by the thought that she, whom I loved and trusted more than anyone else

in the world, could not understand me I was very lonely. Indeed, there were times when I felt that I stood completely alone in this world, cut off from every other living person” (Soseki 240). However, Sensei cannot allow himself to become close even to people without a connection to his guilt-ridden past. He tells the narrator, who wishes for a more meaningful friendship, that “You must remember that there is guilt in loving. You may not derive much satisfaction from our friendship, but at least, there is no danger in it” (Soseki 27). Sensei’s voluntary isolation is, then, a double-edged sword of sorts: he seeks to prevent the pain that relationships with others may bring, but by not allowing himself to trust anyone else, he immerses himself in loneliness, a loneliness that brings him to be able to understand why K may have killed himself, and that makes him fear for his own future. This tendency toward destruction is recognized by Freud as a death instinct, called Thanatos (78). Sensei’s resulting loneliness, combined with his feelings of guilt, ultimately leads Sensei to take his own life after he has told the narrator his story.

Sensei’s story illustrates to the narrator and the novel’s readers the way in which his behavior embodies Freud’s theories. His fear of humiliation by Okusan makes him reluctant to trust her enough to ask to marry her daughter, but by waiting, he allows for a new obstacle to happiness: K and his love for Ojosan. Sensei’s response to this obstacle and the threat it poses illustrate Freud’s theory of aggression and its relation to the components of personality. Sensei’s aggression does succeed in gaining him the object of his desire, but the way in which he obtains Ojosan leaves him guilty and miserable for the rest of his life. As a result, he reverts back to the idea that he must protect against

unhappiness by isolating himself from others, and the loneliness that results from this isolation leads to his ultimate self-destruction.