

Crime and Punishment:

The Subjectivity of the Modern Morality and Its Manifestation in the Meiji Man

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You see, loneliness is the price we have to pay for being born in this modern age, so full of freedom, independence, and our own egotistical selves

-Soseki, 30

What price does the modernity of man bear on our souls? With survival becoming secondary to societal status and material wealth, what is lost in the process? Natsume Soseki's *Kokoro* and Dazai Osamu's *No Longer Human* illustrate the modern individual entwined in the struggle between life and death, virtue and vice, past and present. As individuals who have found themselves in one way or another "disqualified" from the world of human beings, the main protagonists of both works represent the struggle of being human in a way that goes against the societal norm. Whether this disqualification is a result of societal inadequacy or a self-imposed isolation, these men seem to accept this disqualification as a retribution for past sins. This cycle of crime, guilt, and punishment as represented through Sensei in *Kokoro* and Yozo in *No Longer Human*, tackles larger societal issues of whether it is the society or the individual that defines crime and how we interact with and or distance ourselves from this relationship.

God I ask you. Is trustfulness a sin?

-Dazai, 150

Sin and crime, two words that can be defined as broadly as any offense or wrongdoing, to the narrower concept of something that is legally or religiously prohibited, are two concepts that our society places emphasis on. These sins and crimes while often taken as objective, are in reality subjective to the opinions, values, and morals of a societal common thought process. Once these values are infringed upon we call it crime—petty theft, murder, driving while intoxicated—all things we as a society agree to call immoral and or a liability to society. However, in both of the worlds of *Kokoro* and *No Longer Human*, Soseki and Dazai show that the lines that are crossed are less easily defined and less easily categorized into crime or otherwise.

Cowardice, inconsistency, fear, dishonesty, distrust, unhappiness; these are all things that could be seen as personality faults, but not straight out defined as crime. Yet, the characters dig themselves in a guilty conscious and push themselves away from the human society around them. They seek punishment to rid themselves of the guilt, but cannot find satisfaction in it. In Sensei's case in *Kokoro*, he sees K's suffering, but in his own pain and fear of losing Shizu, pushes K farther into the darkness, rather than saving him from it. He admits in his last letter to the narrator that what K "needed (was) kind words, as dry land needs rain. (He) believed (he) was born with a compassionate heart, but (he) was not (his) usual self then" (Soseki, 213). Is this betrayal defined as crime or a simple dishonest act? Is the "immaculate trustfulness" that Yozo saw and held dear in Yoshiko a crime? Is this unyielding ability to trust even the worst man, a fault in Yoshiko's personality or in the context of adultery, does this unfortunate rape constitute a crime? Soseki and Dazai bring the flaws in our defined system of morality to light under the

human lens of these interactions, where the guilty and the innocent are not so easily distinguished.

I had spent my whole life thinking that society must certainly be something powerful , harsh, and severe, but to hear Horiki talk made the words, “Don’t you mean yourself?” come to the tip of my tongue.

-Dazai, 119

The subjectivity of crime stems from the subjectivity of the individual which is passed on to the next generation: with it comes the values that institute our societal morals and standards of living. Yet, individuals can also be said to take the values presented from a larger societal form and individualize it to a more subjective viewpoint which fits their personal one. Ultimately, our individual perception of societal teachings creates the values through which we base our lives and judge others, as well as ourselves. When Horiki criticizes Yozo about his womanizing ways not being socially acceptable, Yozo finds hypocrisy in his words and ventures that it is not actually society at all but rather Horiki doing the ostracizing. In other words, Horiki is judging Yozo’s actions but rather naming society as the one who is criticizing (Dazai, 120).

Many have argued that society is nothing but the individual’s interpretation of it, and in this thought process, the struggles of both Yozo and Sensei stem from their own personal thoughts regarding their actions. Sensei confesses to the narrator that “apart from (himself), only heaven knew (him) for what (he) was. Having once done a dishonest thing, (he) found that (he) could not redeem (himself) without telling everyone of (his) dishonesty” (Soseki, 227). Thus it can be assumed that while no one else knew of this crime, his personal guilt built up inside him.

Sensei's interpretation of what is wrong, albeit bred from a societal conception of wrong and right, was what eventually led to his self-isolation and self-loathing rather than social judgment.

Yozo also mentions the effects that his guilty conscious or "criminal consciousness" has on him and the way he had begun to see this guilt as a "faithful companion," (Dazai, 67) and accept it as part of him. His own actions, in the lens of the human society he cannot will himself to completely accept, are immoral and wrong. He grows used to this guilt like a young child who only comprehends they have done wrong but cannot understand or respect this. While Sensei in his guilt, finds himself retreating from a society he cannot morally accept or feel morally accepted in, Yozo finds himself being forced out of a society he is trying to understand, but at the same time does not care for. Societal pressure forces them both to question themselves, and yet they are already aware of the inconsistencies within their own moral compass as well.

I felt very strongly the sinfulness of man. It was this feeling that sent me to K's grave every month...it was this sense of guilt that led me to feel sometimes that...killing myself seemed a just punishment for my sins

-Soseki, 230

Suicide plays an important part in both novels, as a sort of relief or reprieve from this society that neither sees the main protagonists as fit nor is in itself fit in their eyes. Not only is this tendency presented in the protagonists but also in secondary characters, which become a part of the main characters guilt. Tsuneko's death in *No Longer Human* and K's death in *Kokoro* both trigger things inside Sensei and Yozo that lead them to further ostracize themselves from the societies around them, as well as condemning themselves to further spiral into their cycles of self-isolation. All four of these characters attempt suicide at least once and the best way to

summarize why lies in Sensei's words when reminiscing about K's reasoning for suicide. He states, "He had decided to die, because there seemed no hope of his ever becoming the firm, resolute person that he had always wanted to be"(Soseki, 230).

K, who had spent his whole life trying to pursue the life of a monk, to hold firm and strong, and detach from the human life he looked down upon, finds weakness in his love of Shizu, the woman that would become Sensei's wife. Sensei, in his fear of losing Shizu to K, betrays his confidence and finds himself engulfed in his own deceitfulness and hypocrisy after K commits suicide. He realizes how weak and cowardly he is and that he had "(become as disgusted with (himself) as (he) had been with the rest of the world (Soseki 238). Sensei, as a result of K's suicide, becomes terribly aware of the reality of the world he is living in and the reality of a self that he had always defined as separate from the world he hated so much.

Yozo on the other hand, is the kind of man that lives through the deceit of himself and other people, not so much out of a desire to do so, but a habitual tendency to distort the reality of all the situations around him. Even after his failed attempt at suicide with Tsuneko, he finds himself avoiding the thought of her and the guilt that should have weighed on him when he survived (Dazai, 78). Throughout his life he finds ways to keep living—to stay in this society he completely despises but can't seem to let go of—through this self-deceit. The last straw for him, however, is when he finds himself living off of morphine, and becomes ashamed of how desperate and pitiful he has become. When he can no longer deceive himself he attempts suicide once again (Dazai, 163). Suicide thus becomes the escape from this world where all the characters are able to feel is isolation and guilt, where they cannot find enough forgiveness in themselves, even though the world goes on as if they have done nothing wrong.

Unhappiness. There are all kinds of unhappy people in this world. Those people can fight their unhappiness with society fairly and squarely, and society for its part easily understands and sympathizes with such struggles. My unhappiness stemmed entirely from my own vices and I had no way of fighting anything.

-Dazai, 157

Sensei and Yozo are unhappy: Sensei from his distrust of the world around him and incapability to forgive himself for a past that weighs heavy on him and Yozo from his inability to accept and connect to the reality of the society around him despite his efforts. This unhappiness and self-isolation is where one can place the crime that these two characters have committed. The inability to connect themselves to reality and rather, live as though there is something more important than life and the connections around them.

For Dazai and Soseki, Crime lies neither in the society, nor in the individual but rather in the existence of both. Right and wrong are not defined but rather fluctuate within the modern subject that exists within this relationship. These definitions of virtue and vice are all taken from the influences of the individuals around them and the judgment we ourselves placed on their actions, which ultimately is the stronger of the two. Sensei and Yozo are both men swallowed up by the struggle of the modern man—attempting to live up to an expectation, an ideal, which in reality doesn't actually exist. What they are in need of is humanizing. No matter how full one's head might be with the image of greatness, one was useless...unless one was a worthy man first" (Soseki 180). What Yozo and Sensei's crime was the inability to forgive themselves and accept the reality of and their connection to the world around them—the humanity they longed for lay in the acceptance of their own flaws and understanding the imperfection of mankind.

Works Cited

Dazai, Osamu. *No Longer Human*. Tokyo, 1981. Print.

Soseki, Natsume. *Kokoro*. Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 1969. Print.