
FICTION THROUGHOUT THE AGES

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CENTURIES OF THE NOVEL: MEDIUM FOR MODERNIZATION

Missions of the novel

There was a time when reading the novels was regarded as a central part of liberal arts education, i.e. general education of a higher level. University students and intelligent adults were supposed to read great novels. They were not “reading for fun”, but “reading for *Building*”.

However, my impression is that we are the last generation to experience this notion. The reason is this: the second half of the twentieth century was the last period when the novel played its role as a medium for modernization in many countries. In this respect it is possible to call the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries “the centuries of the novel”.

What does it mean that we can consider the novel to be “a medium for modernization”? Basically speaking, my thesis is this: novelists tried to depict the process and the problems of the modernization of their society as comprehensively as possible. How their society is changing, how people react to modernization, how “new” and “old”, “ideal” and “reality” compete, and finally, how difficult it is to modernize their societies. These are the missions of this literary genre.

It is important to note that such missions of the novel were more conspicuous and urgent in “late-comers” to modernization such as Eastern European countries (including Germany), Asian and countries in the American and African continents. Why? Because in those countries the process of modernization was difficult and complex. While new ideas and systems were hastily imported,

traditional values and customs remained strong. It is well known that opposition between older and younger generations is one of the most typical themes of the novel. And the logic of modernization requires the accentuation on the younger people because modernization gives priority to changes, not to stability.

One should add, however, that the younger generation itself is split; some people accept modernization more ideally, paying attention to such ideas as freedom, liberty, equality and scientific knowledge while others are fascinated with its “realistic” fruits of modernization as success, power and fortune in a new social system. Therefore, an opposition between idealists and realists also belongs to favorite themes of the novel.

From this point of view, Russian literature is very typical. Firstly, it was born and grew in a country in which modernization had been late and full of contradictions. Secondly, it developed or accentuated some themes which had been absent or undeveloped in the novels of “early-starter” countries. Thirdly, Russian literature gave writers and readers of other “late-comer” countries such as Japan, some models as to how to depict their own society which was full of contradictions and problems concerning modernization.

Soseki Natsume’s novel *Sanshiro*

As an illustration of what has been said, I would like to introduce to you a Japanese novel: *Sanshiro* by Soseki Natsume (we traditionally call him by his pseudonym “Soseki”).

Kinnosuke Natsume (the real name of Soseki) was born in 1867, the last year of Edo period which had lasted for over 350 years. He graduated from University of Tokyo, which was the only one in Japan at that time. In 1900 he was sent to London to pursue his study of English and English literature. One can see he was an elite of the new country

which was under the strong process of modernization. However, Soseki had a deep suspicion about the significance of studying English literature and working as a university teacher. In 1907 he finally left the post of the University and got hired by the Asahi Newspaper a professional writer.

Sanshiro is his first novel after he became a professional newspaper writer. It was printed serially in 1908 and was published as a book in 1909. Here I would like to concentrate on the first chapter; the synopsis of which follows:

[Synopsis of the first chapter of *Sanshiro*]

Sanshiro Ogawa who has just graduated from a high school (an undergraduate university comparing to today's standard) in Kumamoto (a southern prefecture of Japan) is travelling toward Tokyo by train. He is going to enter the University (a graduate university by today's standard) which was only one in Tokyo.

He had some funny experiences on the train. First, a young woman who sat near Sanshiro asked him to find an inn in Nagoya where they had to get off at the first night. In the inn, Sanshiro and the woman were taken to be a married couple; they had to spend a night in the same room and even in the same futon (a Japanese traditional bed laid on a *tatami* floor). Sanshiro was strongly embarrassed and took out his towels to make a partition on the futon.

On the next day they found they were going in different directions from Nagoya. The woman accompanied Sanshiro to the ticket gate. "I'm sorry to have put you to much trouble," she said, bowing politely. "Goodbye, please have a pleasant trip." And then, she gave him a long, steady look and quietly said to Sanshiro: "You're quite a coward, aren't you?" A knowing smile crossed her face. He got surprised and could say nothing¹.

The next day on the train he began to talk with a middle-aged man who looked intelligent and unique. They talked about many topics. After seeing a colorful group of Europeans (or Americans) on a station by chance, they turned to talking about a popular topic of Japan and the West. The man said that Japan had nothing to be proud of except Mt. Fuji, and that it is just a natural object. Sanshiro argued that Japan had recently beat Russia in a war and would start developing very much. The man replied, "Japan is going to perish." Sanshiro was appalled because such an opinion was unimaginable in Kumamoto where he was raised.

But then the man continued, "Tokyo is bigger than Kumamoto. And Japan is bigger than Tokyo. And even bigger than Japan is the inside of your head. Don't ever surrender yourself - not to Japan, not to anything." "When he heard this, Sanshiro felt he was truly no longer in Kumamoto. And he realized, too, what a coward he had been there." ²

When they arrived in Tokyo, Sanshiro did not dare to ask the man's name because he thought there must be men like this everywhere in Tokyo.

This is the first chapter of the novel. It sounds interesting, doesn't it? I would recommend that you continue to read the next chapters where it is narrated with humor and irony how Sanshiro experienced Tokyo's, men and women of the new age.

Let me here schematize the structure of the first chapter. In my opinion, the author represents the events in several oppositions which are characteristic to the modern novel. What oppositions do you see?

¹ Natsume Soseki, *Sanshiro: A novel*, translated by Jay Rubin. Introduction by Haruki Murakami. Penguin Classics, 2009, p. 9.

² Natsume Soseki, *Sanshiro: A novel*, p. 16.

1 Sanshiro left Kumamoto for Tokyo. (periphery vs. center).

2 Sanshiro is puzzled by an unknown woman. (man vs. woman)

3 He talked with a middle-aged man. (young vs. old)

4 He looked admiringly at a group of Westerners. (East vs. West).

5 “Even bigger than Japan is the inside of your head.” (reality vs. idea)

All these oppositions are typical of the novel in every modernizing country as they are the social problems which concerned all societies under the process of modernization.

The events narrated in this chapter happen in a train; it is also a popular item of the novel especially in its beginning. Soseki combines it with the opposition “periphery vs. center”. In the next chapters Sanshiro receives letters from his mother from Kumamoto. As is well known, mother’s letters are also a favorite item which accentuates the opposition “periphery vs. center”. Maybe you remember what tore Raskolnikov’s heart in *Crime and Punishment* when he was suffering from poverty and strange ideas in St. Petersburg. It was his mother’s letter describing what a miserable life she and his sister were experiencing in their provincial town and what a big expectations they had of his future.

One can see the climax of the first chapter of *Sanshiro* is the middle-aged man’s words which inspires the young man (readers will see him again in the next chapters as an important figure of the novel, Hirota-sensei³): “Even bigger than Japan is the inside of your head.” His statement makes clear an opposition “reality vs. idea”, which is crucial to the

³ A Japanese word «sensei» is a word to express a respect to teachers and doctors.

modernity. As René Descartes said, “Cogito ergo sum;” i.e. “I think, therefore I am.” The modernity posits the subjectivity over the objectivity. Human subjectivity realizes the order of the world, i.e. the objectivity. So, one could even say “I think, therefore the world is.”

Hirota sensei’s words are important not only as the author’s criticism to the flirtatious mood of Japanese society after the victory of Japan-Russo war but also as a thematic component in the scheme of a young man meeting modern values.

In fact, this novel is about a young man thrown into the very center of modernization of Japan; he observes it carefully and thinks about it in the crossroad of various oppositions. You see all this serves very well as a plot of the novel whose mission is to depict a modernizing society.

From this point of view I would like to say that *Sanshiro* is a model of the modern Japanese novel. However, it is more important to say that this novel has a lot of similarities with novels written in many “late-coming” countries in terms of thematic components and literary devices. The similarities are not only influential, but also typological. Novelists in every country tried to write the novels which had a common mission: to depict their society in the process of modernization as comprehensively as possible.

Therefore, the novel takes an important position in liberal arts education for those who should think about problems of their own society. However, this means also that the time of the novel is over when the process of modernization comes to an end in any country.