

APUR SANSAR (THE WORLD OF APU) 1959

Satyajit Ray

(Bengali language)

Contents (Overview – Plot – Themes – Characters)

OVERVIEW

This film is the last section of the Apu Trilogy, which began with Apu's childhood (*Pather Panchali*) before moving on to his youth (*Aparajito*). In *Apur Sansar*, the mature Apu is an orphan and an unemployed graduate, but he clings to his passion for writing and makes ends meet by tutoring other students who can afford it. His life is then turned upside down when he gets married in a bizarre situation (possible only in India) and then enjoys the sweet pleasures and confronts the responsibility of married life. All is short-lived, however, when his wife dies in childbirth. Apu blames the infant for her death, leaves the baby with his parents-in-law and takes to the road. Father and son are reconciled in the end.

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Perhaps each society, each nation, needs a story that it can tell about itself. A narrative in which most people can find themselves. For India, that self-reflective mirror is the Apu Trilogy, of which this film is the culmination and therefore most crucial part. Childhood innocence and youthful reckoning, the themes of the first two parts, are important stages in a person's life, but the complexities of adulthood are more difficult to depict and to understand. And that is the achievement of *The World of Apu*, a title chosen to suggest the totality of the project. Life in Hindu society is traditionally structured as a four-fold development: youth, married life, retirement and (for some) spiritual renunciation. Ray has shown youth in *Pather Panchali* and *Aparajito*, and he depicts marriage in *Apur Sansar*. But he manages also to include renunciation in the section that follows the wife's death, in which Apu wanders around like an itinerant ascetic, dressed almost in rags, with no concern for worldly affairs. And, then, at the end, the responsibility of marriage and parenthood is reintroduced when Apu accepts his role as the father of his son. In other words, Apu completes the cycle and yet lives on to start again. It is a clever and dramatically effective variation on the traditional four stages of life, which is one reason why this final film is so popular in India.

STORY

Struggling writer The film opens with a sequence showing Apu sleeping in a small room in a rooming house in Calcutta. We know that he has lost his mother (in the second part of the trilogy), and now we see that he is struggling. The room is untidy, even dirty, with a torn and soiled cloth trying to cover a window and keep out the sun. Lying beside him on the bed are his writing things. He goes downstairs to breakfast, where his landlord demands money for his three months of unpaid rent. Apu agrees to sell some of his precious books. Apu, we learn, has graduated from college and would have gone to university, except that he cannot afford the fees. Nor can he find a decent job (though there are hints that he doesn't want an ordinary job). To keep the wolf from the door, he gives private tutoring to other, more affluent students. His only pleasure is the novel he is writing, a semi-autobiographical novel.

Accidental marriage As far as we know, Apu has shown no interest in women or in marriage, but that is about to change due to an ingenious twist of the plot. One day, Apu runs into his old school mate, Pulu, who persuades him to 'get out of the city' and accompany him on a journey to a village to celebrate a relative's wedding. Apu agrees and becomes the bridegroom. What happens is that, just when everyone is waiting for the wedding ritual to begin, the bride's parents learn that their future son-in-law has a history of mental illness. The mother cancels the wedding, despite the father's protests. As he points out, if their daughter is not married at the auspicious hour, already agreed by astrological gurus, she will be socially ostracised and remain unmarried forever. Urged on by Pulu and others,

Apu reluctantly agrees to play the saviour. He puts on the groom's ceremonial dress and marries the girl.

Newly-weds Apu takes his bewildered and shy wife, Aparna, back to Calcutta, where she immediately sets about making improvements. Gone is the torn sheet for a curtain, which she replaces with prettily embroidered cloth. The floors are scrubbed and the linen washed. Apu comes to terms with their financial situation, shelves his writing and takes up a clerical position. These few months of their marriage are depicted with tenderness and a little humour. Both are shy, sexually immature and physically awkward, but through Ray's subtle direction we see that they begin to love each other. Without needing to show it, we understand that they consummate their marriage.

Death To their great joy, Aparna becomes pregnant and goes back to her parents' home to rest before giving birth. Apu is very solicitous of her welfare, fearing for her health, but agrees to let her return for two months. They exchange letters, until a relative comes from the village and explains that she has died in childbirth. The son lives. Cut to the core, he now becomes the mentally unstable man whose place he took at the wedding. He strikes out at people, screams in public and almost commits suicide. These scenes are intercut with scenes of the grieving mother-in-law and the innocent child in a cradle.

Escape and resolution Apu rejects his role as father, refuses to see the child and takes to a life of wandering. We follow him on a series of journeys to various parts of north India, while his fatherless son grows up wild. Pulu, the old friend, sees the boy and then goes to find Apu, who is working in a mining quarry. After stern words, Pulu convinces Apu that he must accept this responsibility as a father. But when Apu approaches him, the son, Kajal, rejects him. With the roles reversed, everything is all square. Finally, Kajal accepts Apu as a friend, if not yet as a father, and the film ends with a shot of the happy father walking along the river with the boy on his shoulders.

THEMES

Freedom This film is structured around four themes that develop one after the other. The beginning of the story is dominated by Apu's freedom from social and family obligations. Yes, he struggles financially in Calcutta and lives in cramped quarters, but he is content. He can enjoy the modern city, he can write his novel, make friends and walk the bustling streets of a major metropolis as a young man who has no ties. The excitement of the city is (again) visualised by the moving trains, which appear frequently in the background. His inner state of mind is well described in a description Apu gives to Pulu (his friend) of the protagonist of his novel: 'He has imagination, he's intrigued by little things. He has greatness in him, perhaps. He has the ability to create. But he doesn't, though that's not a tragedy. He remains poor, in want. But he doesn't turn from life. He doesn't want to escape. He is fulfilled. He wants to live.'

Engagement Freedom turns to engagement when Apu volunteers to marry Aparna, after the groom is discovered to have a history of mental illness. In the flash of an eye, he makes a rash decision and the carefree young man about town becomes responsible for another person. When he takes his unsuspecting wife back to Calcutta, he accepts a steady but boring job as a clerk. He buckles down to his responsibility as a husband and earns a modest living, so that he and his wife can live together in the expensive city. When his wife becomes pregnant, Apu is further pulled into the mesh of engagement.

Renunciation When Aparna dies, and the baby survives, Apu chooses to reject his responsibility as a father. Like a Hindu holy man, he renounces the social world, lets his beard grow and wanders from place to place, working at menial jobs and caring for no one. His ultimate act of withdrawal is the abandonment of his precious novel. Standing on a hillside, he lets the pages drift down into oblivion.

Responsibility By the end of the film, however, Apu comes full circle and forces himself to accept his responsibility for his motherless son. In a series of scenes that rival the tenderness of Apu and Aparna in their apartment, Apu and Kajal learn to trust each other, at least a little. Apu has been persuaded by his friend to accept his son, and at first it appears that Apu thinks that he *should* accept Kajal rather than feeling that he *wants* to. Once he actually meets the young boy, however, Apu realises that he loves him. This is the perfect conclusion to a story of a young man's maturation.

CHARACTERS

Apu Apu is the young man who marries Aparna. Apu the young man is still Apu the boy, whom we saw in the first film of the trilogy. Although he has little money, he is high-spirited, excitable and effervescent. He struggles, but he revels in the life of the city, his books and eating out in cheap restaurants. He has even learned to play the bamboo flute. He laughs a lot and soon becomes a knight in shining armour when he selflessly takes the place of the (mentally ill) bridegroom and rescues a young woman from a life of social ostracism. All that emotion is flipped on it head when his wife, whom he has learned to love, dies. Now, his deep sensitivity engenders unending despair. But Apu, we must remember, is the 'unvanquished,' and so he eventually summons up the strength to accept his responsibility as a father and reclaim his son.

Forlorn Following his wife's death in childbirth, Apu is devastated. The young man full of love and dreams is now an empty shell, drained and numb with pain. The point where we realise he has given up all hope comes after he has been wandering in the hills, unshaven, in dirty clothes and without a destination. In one dramatic scene, standing on a hill and watching the sunset, he reaches into his satchel and pulls out the pages of the novel he was been working on for many years. He glances at the first page and then, slowly, loosens his grip on the whole pile and lets them go. They flutter in the air and float down into the valley, while he stands on the hills, hands outstretched as if in penance. It is a symbol of his despair that he no longer cares for the thing he has nurtured for so long.

Mature One of the most moving scenes in the entire Apu trilogy occurs at the very end of this, the final, instalment. Apu has been persuaded by his friend, Pulu, to take responsibility for his son, whom he has never seen. Apu goes to his in-laws to see his son, but he looks like a vagrant, with torn clothes and uncut hair, carrying a bedroll under his arm. First, he has to convince his father-in-law that he will take care of their grandson, who doesn't even know Apu. In scenes with little dialogue, Apu stands before his son and hopes that the boy will accept him. But the boy, who looks like Apu when he was a youngster (in *Pather Panchali*, the first film in the trilogy), is sceptical and rejects him. Apu starts to leave, defeated, but then senses a movement behind him. His son has followed him, and when Apu turns around, they come toward each other. With a beaming smile, father picks up son and hoists him onto his shoulders. This final shot of the final film of the story of Apu shows him as a fully matured adult.

Aparna Aparna is a young woman whose life takes an unexpected turn when she ends up marrying someone completely unknown to her. At first, she is confused and unhappy, but soon realises that in Apu, the accidental husband, she is bound to a sensitive and thoughtful person. She is very beautiful but also practical and adapts quickly to her new role as the wife of a poor writer in the city. In a series of vignettes, Ray captures the development of her feelings for Apu. Shyness, laughter, tenderness, intimacy and full sensual satisfaction. She is both innocent and clever at the same time.

Practical Aparna's practical nature is revealed in a quick sequence of shots after she is taken by Apu to his grubby apartment in Calcutta. Sizing up the situation in minutes, she embarks on a campaign of domestic upgrade. Where there was once a grimy cloth serving as a curtain for the only window, there is now a pretty patterned curtain. Gone are the stains on the wall and the cockroaches in the bathing area. Although she was raised in semi-luxury, in a large house with many servants, she is not put off by the crowded and noisy building in which they live. She is young, her husband is a stranger, their home is not what she would have wanted, but Aparna is clever and resourceful.

Playful Another scene that illustrates Aparna's character occurs a few days after the newly-weds have come to live in Calcutta. In the early morning, we see the two of them lying side by side, but not touching, on a bed. Although they are married, they are not intimate. Aparna gets up to start the morning routine, letting her husband sleep a little longer. As she stands, however, she realises that something is tugging her back. Then he sees that Apu has tied the end of her sari to his blanket. At first, she is angered by his cheekiness, but she cannot prevent a little smile from spreading across her face. In mock anger, she pouts her lips and smacks her husband gently on his back. As she turns away, she is giggling and runs off to suppress laughing out loud. It is a moment of pure joy, revealing the innocence and tenderness of the new bride. She is practical, but she is also playful.

Kajal Kajal is their son.
Pulu Pulu is Apu's old friend from school.
Sasinarayan Sasinarayan is Pulu's uncle and Aparna's father.
Landlord The landlord is the man to whom Apu pays rent.





(Apu and Aparna)