

Sanshirô (1908)

Natsume Sôseki

Plot and Narrative

Natsume Sôseki can be said to have fully matured as a writer with the appearance of a trilogy of novels written between 1908 and 1911. The first of these— *Sanshirô* (1908)— concerns an eager but naïve young man from the provinces, Ogawa Sanshirô, and his formative experiences as a student at Tokyo University— and, more to the point, as a student of life.

The novel begins with Sanshirô aboard a train that will take him from far-off Kumamoto to Tokyo, where he will enter the prestigious Imperial University. En route, he has an encounter with a young woman that eventuates in his failure to respond to her physical advances. And aboard the train he makes the acquaintance of a cynical individual who waxes philosophical, proclaiming that Japan is on a path leading to its destruction. He reappears as a major character in the novel— Professor Hirota.

Recalling *Botchan*'s awakening to the harsh realities of life in Sôseki's 1906 novel of the same name, Sanshirô is initially overwhelmed by the big city and its dizzying pace, engendering a sense of alienation and estrangement. Trying to make sense of his new circumstance, Sanshirô imagines his world as comprising three distinct realms— first, his hometown in the remote provinces; second, the realm of thought and reason, centering on the University and his circle of friends and acquaintances; and third, the realm of emotion, which relates to his growing affection for Mineko, a strikingly attractive young woman who is part of his circle.

Pondering his confused state of mind, "Sanshirô felt that his present life was becoming a thing of far deeper significance than his life in Kumamoto had been. But there was something unsettling that made him anxious, and he wished somehow to dispel this anxiety." (Based on *Sanshirô*, p 90)

The novel goes on to trace the course of Sanshirô's education, which is being molded by his encounters and discussions with his friends. He finds himself exposed to the jarring intersection of idealism and skepticism, the claims of science versus the humanities, and the self-expressive power of art.

At its core, though, Sanshirô's education in life draws him to the realm of emotion, through his increasing infatuation with Mineko— the very model of modern, independent Japanese womanhood. Notwithstanding his elite university training, the young man has yet to 'graduate' into a mature adulthood that will enable him to function in a competitive and unforgiving world.

When Mineko looked at him in that way, Sanshirô knew that this woman was too much for him. Still looking at him, Mineko said, "Lost child. . . By the way, Sanshirô, this translates into English as 'stray sheep.'" Reduced to silence, he could only regret his inability to utter a single word in response. (Based on *Sanshirô*, p 99)

Branded by Mineko as a stray sheep, the term— and its layers of meaning— is revisited as the novel develops. It may be said to apply broadly to an entire stratum of Meiji society, cut adrift from their cultural moorings and left to their own devices in a strange and indifferent world. In short, the University figures in the novel both as the center of advanced learning and modern civilization, and as an ivory tower insulating its elite 'captives' from the harsh realities of life. Sanshirô is exposed to a barrage of arguments and rhetorical display, but he ultimately fails to make sense of it all. Here the author's sardonic view of academic pretense and posturing is evident. The novel ends with Mineko married to someone else, as Sanshirô is left to ponder the words 'stray sheep.'

Sanshirô presents a microcosm of late-Meiji Tokyo intellectuals and their academic sphere, channeled through the experiences of its protagonist. It is not exactly a 'novel of development.' Rather, *Sanshirô* presents a tableau of characters engaged in a series of dramatic encounters and events. In this manner we learn of their traits and eccentricities, which in turn points to the virtues of social engagement and mutual understanding and concern. For the author, this can be said to serve as a welcome corrective to the rampant egoism and self-absorption that so troubled him.

The other novels in Sôseki's trilogy

Essentially a sequel to *Sanshirô*, *And Then* (*Sore kara*, 1909) centers on a savvy, somewhat world-weary protagonist, Daisuke, who is in effect a version of *Sanshirô* as a jaded adult. Daisuke is well off, smug, and entirely self-absorbed. The novel presents a sustained view of his inner world, with impressive psychological verisimilitude. Like *Sanshirô*, Daisuke is attracted to an unattainable woman— Michiyo, the wife of his best friend. The novel traces his inner rationalizations and compulsions and ends with the ineffectual protagonist locked in his private world and on the verge of madness— a hapless victim of the alienating forces of modern society.

The final novel of Sôseki's trilogy, *The Gate* (*Mon*, 1911) tells of another troubled Tokyo-ite. Unlike Daisuke, though, Sôsuke has a dead-end job and an unhappy marriage to Oyone, whom he had stolen away from a friend. Beset by financial problems and at his wits' end, Sôsuke looks to religion as a means of escape. Intent on achieving peace of mind through meditation, he goes to a monastery to immerse himself in Zen practice. But Sôsuke is sadly misguided and finds himself back where he started— confused, morose, and alone.

Themes

Coming-of-age This is *Sanshirô*'s virtual 'mission' in the novel, yet the course of his education in life yields inconclusive results.

Women and their newfound agency Mineko represents the newly-liberated modern Japanese woman, although the level of agency and autonomy that she achieves in the novel is questionable.

The urban-rural divide A familiar theme of Meiji literature, and Sôseki's in particular, the urban-rural divide typically favors the lure of the city and the anxieties that the urban condition triggers.

The University: Catalyst for modernization? *Sanshirô* is in a sense defined by the University campus and environs, together with the interaction of students and faculty. Centering on the interrelationship of its small circle of characters and the interiority of its protagonist, Sôseki's novel leaves unanswered the larger question of how the Imperial University— and higher education in general— figures in Japan's emergence as a modern society and world power.

Key Characters

Ogawa Sanshirô The novel's protagonist, whose innocent, guileless nature has helped make *Sanshirô*, together with *Botchan*, perennial favorites among Japanese readers. *Sanshirô* undergoes a host of new experiences in the course of the novel, but it is unclear as to how he has changed and where he is headed. *Sanshirô*'s abortive romantic longings point to the prominent motif of male ineffectuality in much Meiji literature.

Nonomiya Sôhachi A research physicist at the University and distant family acquaintance of *Sanshirô*. He and his sister Yoshiko are an integral part of *Sanshirô*'s circle.

Professor Hirota The intellectual leader of *Sanshirô*'s circle, Hirota is termed 'Great Darkness' on account of his abstruse philosophical pronouncements and detached, indifferent attitude. A passive individual, Hirota ends up implicated in a scheme masterminded by his protégé, Yojirô.

Sasaki Yojirô Sanshirô's self-appointed guide and counselor— a relationship that yields mixed results. Yojirô is essentially a comic character— a compulsive talker and schemer, an idealist and blowhard, maddeningly impulsive yet ultimately decent and well-intentioned. His failed attempt to have Hirota enter the University faculty so as to counter the policy of favoring Western scholars ends up implicating Sanshirô.

Satomi Mineko Archetypal 'new woman,' who becomes Sanshirô's love interest. Member of a well-to-do Christian family, Mineko is herself attracted to Sanshirô, but theirs is an unfulfilled romantic encounter. Mineko is a complex character, embodying both self-confidence and indecisiveness. She is married at the end of the novel, to a friend of her older brother, and the oversized portrait of her that was painted by the artist Haraguchi becomes an enigmatic center of attention.

Source: Natsume Sôseki, *Sanshirô* (1908), transl., Jay Rubin, with an Introduction by Haruki Murakami (Penguin Classics, 2009)