

## Literature in the Japanese History Classroom

By Steven J. Ericson

In the courses I teach in Japanese history, I incorporate a fair amount of literary works. In lectures, besides quoting frequently from contemporary historical sources, I try to include vivid or humorous excerpts from poems, short stories, and novels. In doing so, I strive to keep students' interest by varying the pace and content of my lectures and to illustrate in a lively and memorable way key points I make about historical developments. With the similar aim of adding variety and bringing to life the history I am covering, I assign one or two short stories on almost a weekly basis and, during the course of the term, one or two novels dealing with the periods or themes under consideration. I also focus some of the discussion sections on assigned readings in Japanese fiction. In the discussions themselves, I encourage students to comment critically on what the literary works tell them about the society and times they have encountered in the textbook and other required history readings.

Literature can do more than just enliven history teaching, however; at times it can also promote a deeper understanding of the past than historical writing. For instance, works of fiction can provide greater detail on the everyday lives of people and a better feel for their attitudes and modes of thinking. Literary works, as one of my students noted, "deliver the emotions of the age," conveying the general atmosphere of a given time and place in ways that most historical texts are simply unable to do.

Literature can also help to "make abstract concepts more intelligible"<sup>1</sup> by (in my own students' words) "personalizing" or "humanizing" the history in question. For courses on modern Japanese history, such concepts or themes—which might serve as guidelines for determining the utility of particular literary works—include, for the Tokugawa-Meiji transition, the multiple transformations of Japanese government and society; for late Meiji, the intensifying problems of cultural identity and empire; for Taishō, the movement toward "democracy" and mounting social unrest; for early Shōwa, the rise of militarism and overseas aggression; and for the postwar era, the emergence of a mass middle-class society. In addition, certain themes run through all these periods, particularly the evolving role and status of women in modern Japan. Literature can be particularly effective in addressing gender issues through its power to present the "human side" of those eras, putting into a rich sociocultural context how people may have thought and interacted in the past.

Let me give four examples of how I use literature in my lectures. To convey the depths of anti-foreign sentiment aroused in the loyalist samurai or *shishi* who helped put the spotlight on the imperial court and undermine the authority of the shogunate in late Tokugawa, I like to recite a lengthy poem by Yamagata Aritomo. In it he reacts angrily to a coercive action by the crew of

a British vessel in his home domain in mid-1860. Toward the beginning of the poem, Yamagata fumes:

*the ugly English barbarians,  
who come from a distance as far as the white cloud,  
felt envious [of the country of abundant rice],  
and came forth to get the good things,  
and to exchange the sullied things of England  
for the precious things of the divine country,  
so that their home country would prosper.*

After recounting the insults of the British, he concludes brashly:

*With many warriors with their bows and arrows we  
will defeat the impudent, ugly barbarians.  
When we unsheathe our swords and kill them  
they will suffer the force of the divine wind from Isuzu  
shrine and will be thrown into the deep sea  
like bits of seaweed.<sup>2</sup>*

The poem expresses more vividly than any historical account the fervid xenophobia of the *sonnō-jōi* ("revere the emperor, expel the barbarian") movement before the devastating Western bombardments of Satsuma and Chōshū in 1863–4 drove home the futility of "expulsion" in the face of superior Western military technology.

To illustrate the dilemmas Japanese intellectuals faced in late Meiji in trying to reconcile native tradition with Western influence, I read from one of my favorite passages in the works of Natsume Sōseki—a description of a night at the theater in the novel *Sanshirō* (1908). The title character's hilariously bewildered reactions to the University Literary Society's staging of a traditional Noh play followed by *Hamlet* nicely capture the often jarring effect that the juxtaposition of old and new had on Meiji-era Japanese.<sup>3</sup> First, the Noh performance:

On stage, the action had already begun. All the characters wore the shoes and headgear of ancient nobility. A long palanquin was carried on. Someone in the middle of the stage forced it to a halt. When the men lowered the palanquin, yet another character emerged from it. He drew his sword and began dueling with the one who had stopped the palanquin. Sanshirō had no idea what was going on. [His schoolmate] Yojirō had told him the story, but he had not paid much attention, assuming that it would be clear enough when he saw the play. Now, however, the meaning eluded him. He remembered only the name of the Great Minister Iruka. Which of them could be Iruka? he wondered. Soon he despaired of ever finding out and decided to watch the entire stage as a manifestation of Iruka. After a while the headgear, the boots, the narrow-sleeved robes, even the language began to seem Irukaresque. In fact, Sanshirō had no very precise idea of who Iruka was to begin with. His study of Japanese history was itself a thing of the distant past, and Iruka, who figured in the most ancient part, he had forgotten entirely. Perhaps he had lived in the reign of Empress Suiko, though it might just as well have been Emperor Kimmei? It was neither Ojin nor Shōmu, of that he felt certain. San-

shiro was simply in an Iruka mood. That was quite enough for watching a play, he decided, looking at the vaguely Chinese-style costumes and scenery. The plot, however, he did not understand in the least. Eventually, the curtain fell.

Then, after a brief intermission:

Soon the curtain rose again and *Hamlet* started. Once, at Professor Hirota's, Sanshirō had seen a photograph of a famous Western actor dressed as Hamlet. The Hamlet that appeared before him now was in much the same costume as the other. The faces, too, were similar. Both had brows knit in anguish.

The movements of this Hamlet were wonderfully nimble. He moved grandly across the stage and the production moved with him. This was vastly different from Iruka's restrained Noh style. Especially when he stood in the middle of the stage, stretching his arms out wide or glaring at the sky, he aroused such excitement that the spectators were conscious of nothing but him.

Meanwhile, the dialogue was in Japanese, translated Japanese, Japanese spoken with exaggerated intonations, unusual rhythms. It poured forth so fluently at times it seemed almost too eloquent. It was written in a fine literary style, but it was not moving. Sanshirō wished that Hamlet would say something a little more characteristically Japanese. Where he expected him to say, "Mother, you must not do that. It is an affront to Father's memory," Hamlet would suddenly bring in Apollo or someone and smooth things over. Meanwhile, mother and son both looked as if they were ready to burst into tears. Sanshirō was only dimly aware of the inconsistency, however. The courage to pronounce the thing absurd was not forthcoming.

In a survey I conducted in my modern Japan course at Dartmouth College in the fall of 2000 on the use of literature in history classes, one student responded: "The Sōseki excerpt you read aloud in class exemplified the point I was making [about literature as 'an invaluable tool for getting a tangible hold on the history of everyday people']. I empathized with the protagonist's bafflement at all things European while watching the rendition of *Hamlet*. His confusion gave me a much more solid grasp of what it must have been like to live in Meiji Japan flooded by Western culture."

In explaining the rise of tenancy disputes in interwar Japan, I discuss, among other factors, the weakening of traditional landlord-tenant ties, as many landlords moved to the city and began investing in industry. To highlight this trend, I quote the graphic description of such budding capitalists by the proletarian writer Kobayashi Takiji in his story "The Absentee Landlord" (1929): "Except for wanting to get the highest rents from the farmers, the landlords dismiss them from their minds and turn eagerly to other enterprises. . . . They're a strange breed of fish—like mermen. The upper part is a landowner, but the lower part is a capitalist, and the lower part is rapidly taking over the torso."<sup>4</sup>

Finally, when I lecture on the costs of rapid industrialization and urbanization in postwar Japan, I try to underscore the toll that long hours of commuting, cramped apartment living, and pressures for conformity in the workplace exact on the middle-class "salary-man" by summarizing Yamakawa Masao's short story "The Talisman" (1963).<sup>5</sup> The story concerns a typical white-collar worker named Sekiguchi Jirō who lives in a large, impersonal apartment complex and suffers an acute sense of identity loss when a neighbor by the name of Kurose Jirō mistakes Sekiguchi's apartment for his own. The protagonist begins to feel that the "terrible uniformity" of apartment-house life "had gone beyond externals. It had gone to the very heart of things." He wonders "whether identical surroundings and identical routines were bringing us to identical emotions and identical outlets for them. And if so we were like all those toy soldiers lined up on a department-store counter. Like standardized puppets." Sekiguchi finally hits upon a way to assert his individuality, to distinguish himself from "all those numberless white-collar workers, . . . the toy soldiers." His solution is to carry around in his briefcase an unusual "talisman"—a bundle of dynamite—which, he thinks, makes him different inasmuch as he can literally have an "impact" on his surroundings. But even then Sekiguchi discovers that he is not unique. One evening he hears on the radio that a dynamite explosion has occurred on a bus near his apartment building: "The police think the dynamite was in a briefcase of one of the three people killed. An engineer named Kurose Jirō."

For assigned readings in literature, I tend to draw on standard compilations such as *Modern Japanese Literature: An Anthology*, compiled and edited by Donald Keene (Grove Press, 1956); *Modern Japanese Stories: An Anthology*, edited by Ivan Morris (Tuttle, 1962); and *Contemporary Japanese Literature: An Anthology of Fiction, Film, and Other Writing Since 1945*, edited by Howard Hibbett (Knopf, 1977). From the Keene anthology, I use Kanagaki Robun, "The Beefeater," and Hattori Bushō, "The Western Peep Show," to illustrate the mania for Western ways in early Meiji. I assign from the Morris collection Ogawa Mimei, "The Handstand," and Hayama Yoshiaki, "Letter Found in a Cement-Barrel," as examples of proletarian literature depicting the hardships of the interwar working class, as well as Ibuse Masuji, "The Charcoal Bus," a political satire on the Japanese wartime experience and its aftermath. In the Hibbett anthology, Kojima Nobuo's story "The American School" offers a useful corrective to overly positive portrayals of Japanese responses to the postwar American Occupation. Also in the Hibbett collection, the story "Wedlock" by Furui Yoshikichi and the filmscript "Tokyo Story" by Ozu Yasujiro provide glimpses into the kinds of changes the Japanese family and lifestyles have undergone since World War II. For the postwar economy, I assign stories from *Made in Japan and Other Japanese Business Novels* translated and edited by Tamae K. Prindle (M. E. Sharpe, 1989); Shiroyama Saburō's "Made in Japan," for example, illuminates the struggles of Japanese manufacturers, in this case thermometer makers, to enter the American market by improving production methods and product quality during the 1950s.

*Readings in fiction for the most part supplement the historical writings I assign, but I seek to integrate the literary works into lectures and discussions as much as possible, supplying historical background and context for them and drawing explicit connections between the literature and the history in question.*

Historical fiction represents another category of literature that I incorporate into my courses. Shimazaki Tōson's epic novel *Before the Dawn*, translated by William E. Naff (University of Hawaii Press, 1987), a "slightly fictionalized story" of the author's family in the transition from Tokugawa to Meiji, is probably too massive to use in its entirety other than in upper-level college or graduate courses.<sup>6</sup> More manageable for the Tokugawa and Meiji periods are stories such as "The Incident at Sakai" from *The Historical Literature of Mori Ōgai*, edited by David Dilworth and J. Thomas Rimer (2 vols.; University of Hawaii Press, 1977). Also drawing on Mori Ōgai for the Tokugawa-Meiji transition is Edwin McClellan, *Woman in the Crested Kimono: The Life of Shibue Io and Her Family* (Yale University Press, 1985).

A graphic depiction of the trials and abuses that prewar farm women suffered is the "non-fiction novelette" *Fuki no tō* (Bog rhubarb shoots) by Yamashiro Tomoe, excerpted in Mikiso Hane, *Peasants, Rebels, and Outcasts: The Underside of Modern Japan* (Pantheon, 1982), pp. 85–101. Mishima Yukio provides a gruesomely detailed account of the ritual suicides of a young military officer and his wife at the time of the abortive 1936 uprising of right-wing army elements in the story "Patriotism,"

included in his *Death in Midsummer, and Other Stories* (New Directions, 1966). Finally, Kinoshita Junji recreates the 1946–48 Tokyo War Crimes Trials, raising thorny issues of responsibility and judgment, in the first half of his play *Between God and Man*, translated by Eric J. Gangloff (University of Tokyo Press and University of Washington Press, 1979).

Almost all of these readings would be appropriate for pre-college students, with the possible exception of Mishima's "Patriotism" and Ōgai's "The Incident at Sakai" with their lurid descriptions of disembowelments and beheadings. For students at all levels, one at the very least ought to warn about the danger such works have of reinforcing essentialized stereotypes about Japanese culture.

Readings in fiction for the most part supplement the historical writings I assign, but I seek to integrate the literary works into lectures and discussions as much as possible, supplying historical background and context for them and drawing explicit connections between the literature and the history in question. In the survey I carried out in my Fall 2000 course on modern Japan, students were quick to point out the importance of such integration. Alluding to my lecture on interwar labor, in which, owing to time constraints, I had neglected to tie in the example of proletarian literature assigned for that week, one student expressed confusion over the role of that particular reading, stating that he had been unable to make any "tangible connection."

By contrast, students had little, if any, confusion over my use in that course of Natsume Sōseki's novel *Kokoro* (1914), which is one exception to the usually supplemental role of literature in my classes. The greatest work by the foremost writer of the Meiji era, *Kokoro*, translated by Edwin McClellan (Regnery/Gateway, 1957; reproduced in its entirety at <http://eldred.net/mediaone.net/ns/soseki.html>), plays a central part in my treatment

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of the cultural and intellectual history of that period and provides the focus for one of the discussion sessions in the class. In my lecture preceding that discussion, I place Sōseki in historical context, presenting his work as giving clear expression to the kinds of alienation and ambivalence late Meiji intellectuals were experiencing in the face of Japan's dizzying pace of modernization. Also beforehand I show the video "The Meiji Revolution," which includes references to Sōseki and *Kokoro*, from the Pacific Century series (Annenberg/CPB, 1992). In addition, I distribute copies of a sheet of biographical information on the author, drawing on the *Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan* (Kodansha, 1983) entry on him,<sup>7</sup> as well as a list of study questions to help the students prepare for the discussion.

The handout of study questions lists the main points we try to cover in the discussion. After briefly reviewing Sōseki's career and situating *Kokoro* therein, I ask the students what identifies the novel as a work of the late Meiji period: What tells them that the story could not have taken place in the 1870s and 1880s? My goal here is to draw the students in by opening with a relatively straightforward question about concrete, physical markers in the book before moving on to more abstract and conceptual issues. I also want them to think about the extent of social change that Japan had undergone since the beginning of Meiji. Students rarely neglect to point out the most obvious indicator of the novel's time frame: the deaths of the Meiji emperor and of General Nogi Maresuke. Typically they mention as well the prevalence of streetcars and trains and the widening gulfs between new and old generations and between city and countryside. I then ask how *Kokoro* reflects the kinds of cultural and intellectual dilemmas that Japanese were confronting in late Meiji. I suggest the students consider what the main themes of the book are—loneliness, alienation, betrayal, inability to communicate, and the like—and how those themes find expression in the novel. I also pose the question: To what extent do these issues appear as unique to late Meiji Japan and to what extent as universal? In relation to this point, we discuss the contrasting suicides of General Nogi and Sensei, the one a traditional response to a predicament, and the other a more modern, existential response.

Finally, I raise the key issue of the potential problems one should be aware of in treating literary works like *Kokoro* as social documents or windows on a particular time and place. Students often note that novels are more subject to the authors' own biases and idiosyncratic views than purportedly "objective" or "factual" historical accounts; therefore one needs to guard against overgeneralizing from them about larger trends in society. Usually they are eager to know more about the reception *Kokoro* had when it came out in 1914. I note that Sōseki's works, most of which he initially serialized in newspapers, enjoyed considerable popularity and wide readership at the time, facts suggesting that they resonated on some level with many contemporary Japanese, at least with educated urban residents. Half in jest, I pass around a ¥1,000 bill with Sōseki's visage to show that Japan's government, at any rate, considers him a representative Japanese (one might

note the irony of this official appropriation of a cultural icon in view of Sōseki's growing estrangement from the state in his later years).

The advantages of selectively using literature in history courses far outweigh any potential drawbacks. The students who took part in the survey I conducted last fall (over half of the sixty in my modern Japan course) amply testified to the benefits: in general, literary works "are welcome departures from the textbook and have the ability to captivate the student's interest . . . [promoting] further learning in the particular area of study"; reading literature allows students "to get a better feel for the social climate and mood" of the period under consideration—"to transport themselves into the past for a fuller understanding of the emotional and human components of events. It serves as students' best available means of time-travel." A few respondents offered the postmodernist observation that questions about historical accuracy and representativeness should not prevent us from using literary works, since no text, fictional or historical, is entirely free of bias or interpretation—no source should escape scrutiny in that regard. Apart from the enrichment and entertainment value that reading and discussing fiction afford, that critical insight may be the most important benefit of all of bringing literature into the history classroom. ■

#### NOTES

1. Jo Anne Engelbert, "Image and Identity: Representations of Latin American Women in Film and Fiction," in Elizabeth Mahan et al., *Teaching with Literature*, Latin American Studies Consortium of New England, Occasional Paper No. 12 (November 1997), p. 24.
2. Roger F. Hackett, *Yamagata Aritomo in the Rise of Modern Japan, 1838–1922* (Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 18–19.
3. Natsume Sōseki, *Sanshirō: A Novel*, tr. Jay Rubin (University of Washington Press, 1977), pp. 198–201.
4. Takiji Kobayashi, "The Factory Ship" and "The Absentee Landlord," trans. Frank Motofuji (University of Washington Press, 1973), p. 147.
5. In *As the Japanese See It: Past and Present*, comp. and ed. Michiko Y. Aoki and Margaret B. Dardess (University of Hawaii Press, 1981), pp. 212–18.
6. For this novel, see William E. Naff, "Shimazaki Tōson's *Before the Dawn*: Historical Fiction as History and as Literature," in *The Ambivalence of Nationalism: Modern Japan between East and West*, ed. James W. White et al. (University Press of America, 1990), pp. 79–114.
7. Other useful sources for background on Sōseki include Howard S. Hibbett, "Natsume Sōseki and the Psychological Novel," in *Tradition and Modernization in Japanese Culture*, ed. Donald H. Shively (Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 305–46; Masao Miyoshi, *Accomplices of Silence: The Modern Japanese Novel* (University of California Press, 1974), chapter 3; Jay Rubin, "Sōseki on Individualism: *Watakushi no Kojinshugi*," *Monumenta Nipponica* 34.1 (Spring 1979): 21–48; and Paul Anderer, "Sōseki's *Kokoro*," in *Masterworks of Asian Literature in Comparative Perspective: A Guide for Teaching*, ed. Barbara Stoler (M. E. Sharpe, 1994), pp. 493–500.

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