

## *Sanshiro* and the Western Paintings : Sōseki's Application of the Programme of Symbolism

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### Abstract

This paper examines the relation between *Sanshiro* (1908) by Natsume Sōseki<sup>1</sup> (1867-1916) and the Western paintings. Although the influence of the visual arts on his works has been recognized for the past years, the programme of Symbolism which Sōseki might have assimilated into *Sanshiro* has not fully explored yet. This paper attempts to clarify his application of the programme of Symbolism for the representation of the image of the heroine Mineko in *Sanshiro*. The discussion is divided into the following four points: Sōseki's keen interest in the Western paintings; his description of Mineko in conjunction with the girls painted by Jean-Baptiste Greuze<sup>2</sup> (1725-1805); their kinship with girls typical of the Symbolist motifs, and Sōseki's understanding of and inclination toward Symbolism, which is proved to have led him to apply the programme of Symbolism as well as its motifs for his work *Sanshiro*.

### 1. Sōseki's Interest in the Western Paintings

Sōseki loved and had an eye for painting. He painted as an amateur painter under the instruction of Tsuda Seifū (1880-1978) and wrote a number of critical essays about art. Since his childhood, Sōseki had loved "Nanga," the Southern School of Chinese painting which is characterized by a description of peaceful landscapes, and especially after his stay in England,<sup>3</sup> he took a great interest in the Western arts. In his novels, Sōseki makes frequent remarks about art and it may be hardly possible to understand his works properly without taking account of his relation with art.

Sōseki stayed in England from 28 October, 1900 to 5 December, 1902. His diary during the early days of his stay reveals his keen interest in the Western arts and his encounter with the contemporary artistic climate. Soon after he arrived in London, he visited art galleries and museums. On 3 November, 1900, he visited the British Museum (19: 27)<sup>4</sup>; on 5 November, 1900, the National Gallery (27), which may have been the present Tate Britain, because the Tate Britain was

at that time called the National Gallery of British Art ; on 11 November, 1900, the Kensington Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum (28), (although what Sōseki thought to be the Kensington Museum was part of the Victoria and Albert Museum) ; on 29 January, 1901, the National Portrait Gallery and Water Colour Exhibition (the name of the gallery where the exhibition was held is unclear, but it was probably the National Gallery (51) ; on 1 February, 1901, the Dulwich Picture Gallery (51, 52). On 27 March, 1901, he took two of his Japanese friends to the British Museum and the National Gallery (68) ; on 7 April, 1901, the South London Fine Art Gallery, where he saw the paintings by Dante Gabriel Rossetti and John Ruskin (72), and on 13 October, 1901, the Kensington Museum (101).

In addition to these art galleries and museums, the museum catalogues, preserved in the Sōseki Library of the University of Tohoku, Miyagi Prefecture, show that he also visited the Royal Academy of Arts as well as the Wallace Collection.

In 1908, six years after his return from England, Sōseki wrote *Sanshiro*, a novel whose eponymous hero came up from the provinces to attend the University of Tokyo. Sanshiro was brought up in accordance with the traditional Confucian virtues and was a total innocent when confronted by the “sophisticated” people in the capital, such as Mineko, Yojiro, Nonomiya, Professor Hirota and Haraguchi. The novel describes Sanshiro’s first contact with the bewildering changes caused by the “enlightenment” of Westernization in Tokyo and his unsuccessful romance with Mineko. In “Bungaku Zatsuwa” [“Literary Talks,” 1908], Sōseki reveals that he told one of his disciples Morita Sōhei that inspiration for Mineko came from the “unconscious hypocrite” character of Felicitas, in Hermann Sudermann’s novel *Es War*<sup>5</sup> (26). When he showed this idea of the “unconscious hypocrite,” he must also have been thinking about girls he saw in London : girls painted by Greuze and Symbolist artists. Then he portrayed Mineko as if she were a woman in a painting.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. The Unconscious Hypocrite in Paintings by Greuze

One of the features found in Greuze's girls is the cunning combination of youthfulness and ripe maturity. As Edmond and Jules de Goncourt point out, Greuze depicts "an ingenuousness without strength or remorse, yielding to a surprise, to the senses, to pleasure with the charm and skill of a kind of angelic hypocrisy, a kind of natural duplicity" (249). The phrase "angelic hypocrisy" or "natural duplicity" can be identified with the way Sōseki referred to his heroine Mineko's character. Sōseki introduces portraits by Greuze in *Sanshiro* :

"Pardon me," she began bowing. As before, she floated forward from the waist. But her face did not move down. Even while she was bowing, she stared straight at Sanshiro. Her throat seemed to extend toward him, and at the same time her eyes flashed into his.

A few days before, Sanshiro's aesthetics teacher had shown the class some portraits by Greuze. All women painted by this artist, he explained, wore richly *voluptuous* expressions. *Voluptuous!* There was no other way to describe her eyes at that moment. They were trying to tell him something, something *voluptuous*, something that appealed directly to the senses. But their plea pierced the bone of the senses and reached to the marrow. It went beyond bearable sweetness and became a violent stimulus. Far from sweet, it was excruciating. This was not, to be sure, cheap coquetry. There was a cruelty in the girl's glance that made the one it fell on wish to play the coquette. Nor did she bear the slightest resemblance to a portrait by Greuze. Her eyes were small, half the size of those in his paintings. (Rubin 66-67, italics mine)

It is important to recognize that, in order to describe Mineko's eyes, Sōseki uses the English word "voluptuous" in Katakana, the Japanese syllabary for foreign loan words. This word "voluptuous" is found in the museum catalogue, *Pictures*

*in the Wallace Collection*, which Sōseki must have brought back from London and which is now preserved in the Sōseki Library of the University of Tohoku. Frederick Miller says in the catalogue, “The work by which Greuze is best known is that in which he combines, in a way that is all his own, the innocence of girlhood with a sentimental and voluptuous charm ...” (71). *The Times* also uses the word “voluptuous,” referring to Greuze’s paintings, “the head of the young girls, cunningly combining seemingly [sic] simplicity with voluptuous grace ...” (“The Wallace Collection at Hertford House,” 23 June, 1900: 3). It should be noted that the word “voluptuous” must have been associated with Greuze’s girls around the time of 1900, when Sōseki stayed in London and therefore Sōseki must have known the association.

The word “voluptuous” and the image of angelic hypocrisy which the eyes of Greuze’s girls evinced might have stayed long in Sōseki’s mind. When Sōseki intended to write *Sanshiro*, Greuze’s girls might have emerged deep from within his mind, and the word “voluptuous” and its image were together incorporated into the creation of Mineko’s character and the paintings by Greuze thereby became the symbolic core of the work.

### 3. Symbolist Motifs in *Sanshiro*

The following note<sup>7</sup> which Sōseki made during his stay in England, reveals his interest in Rossetti<sup>8</sup> and Symbolism:

Allegory & Symbolism

French Symbolists

Rossetti’s paintings, etc. (Muraoka 247)

The note shows that Sōseki associates Rossetti’s paintings with Symbolism. Rossetti was fascinated with the notion of symbolism, as a way of releasing imagination by relating one image to another. He incorporated the allegorical and expressive significance into a recognizable portrait in *Bocca Baciata* of 1859, which Andrew Wilton asserts “marks a turning point not only for Rossetti but for

nineteenth century art in general ... it is really where the story of Symbolism in Britain started” (19). The woman in the portrait shows “a new type of woman ... sensual and voluptuous, mystical and inscrutable but always humourless, gazing into distance ...” (Surtees 69). This “voluptuous” and “mystical” image of a woman can be identified with Mineko, who also often gazes into the distance as if she were looking into her own soul :

“What are you looking at?”

“Guess.”

“The chickens?”

“No.”

“That big tree?”

“No.”

“I don’t know, then. What?”

“I’ve been watching those white clouds.” (Rubin 70)

In this scene, where Mineko is asking Sanshiro to guess what she is watching, we are reminded of the scene in which the Sphinx asks riddles of all those who pass, an image typical of the Symbolist canon.

When Sanshiro first saw Mineko in the forest of the University campus, she gave him contradictory feelings, pleasure and fear, which can also be seen as another Symbolist motif :

Sanshiro was in a daze. Kneeling by the water, he began to see that there was something wrong, some terrible contradiction—but where? In the girl and the atmosphere of the University? In the colors and the way she looked at him? (Rubin 23)

Ikeda Kimiko points out the resemblance between the description of the drawing room where Sanshiro is kept waiting and Rosetti’s painting *Lady Lilith* (1864–8). *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*,<sup>9</sup> which is preserved at the Sōseki Library,

includes Rossetti's painting *Lady Lilith* and the sonnet "Lilith" for the painting. Sōseki must have seen this ambivalent image of the horror and attraction of Lilith, depicted both in the painting and the poem as reinforcing the analogy with Mineko. Ikeda quotes the sonnet :

### BODY'S BEAUTY

Of Adam's first wife, Lilith, it is told  
    (The witch he loved before the gift of Eve)  
    That, ere the snake's, her sweet tongue could deceive,

And her enchanted hair was the first gold.  
And still she sits, young while the earth is old,  
    And, subtly of herself contemplative,  
    Draws men to watch the bright web she can weave,  
Till heart and body and life are its holds.

The rose and poppy are her flowers ; for where  
    Is he not found, O Lilith, whom shed scent  
And soft-shed kisses and soft sleep shall snare?  
    Lo! as that youth's eyes burned at thine, so went  
    Thy spell through him, and left his straight neck bent  
And round his heart one strangling golden hair. (118)

Ikeda asserts that Sōseki implies Mineko uses her beauty to ensnare an unsuspecting victim, Sanshiro, and draws him into the net she weaves, as does Lilith (110).

When Sanshiro is kept waiting in the drawing room, Mineko appears and they look at each other in the mirror :

Mineko was reflected clearly from the chest upward, holding aside the curtain that hung beyond the door. In the mirror, she looked at

Sanshiro. Sanshiro looked at the [sic] Mineko in the mirror. She smiled.

“Welcome.”

Her voice was behind him. Sanshiro had to turn around... She looked straight at him, saying nothing, a smile about her eyes and lips, and the sight of her thus filled Sanshiro with sweet agony. (Rubin 139)

This mirror image of a woman who brings about fascination together with agony, its image of duality of sweetness and cruelty, is also typical of the Symbolist motif, which has a revealing kinship with Greuze's girls and indicates Sōseki's strong interest in the motifs of Symbolism and the source of his artistic inspiration.

In Sōseki's "Shizen wo Utsusu Bunsho" ["Sentences Describing Nature," 1906]<sup>10</sup>, he maintains that whether he describes nature or material things, it is more interesting just to grasp the central theme of the work and make it stand out conspicuously, rather than to give detailed descriptions (25: 207). It should also be noted that Sōseki's adoption of Greuze's girls and the Symbolist motif for the representation of Mineko's image derives from this stylistic principle of eschewing detailed descriptions, preferring effective use of symbolic allusions as well.

#### 4. Sōseki's Understanding of and Inclination toward Symbolism

On 18 September in 1886 an article by Jean Moreas was published in the Parisian paper *Le Figaro*. Moreas proclaimed the existence of a new school of literature "Symbolism" and revealed his rejection of Naturalism which currently dominated French literature. Arthur Symons published *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* in 1899. Albert Aurier, in 1891, gave a definition of pictorial Symbolism in his article "le Symbolisme en peinture—Paul Gauguin" ["Symbolism in painting—Paul Gauguin"], in the *Mercure de France*. And it was just after the time of the emergence of this new movement that Sōseki began to stay in London. His note, mentioned above, reveals that he must have regarded the new artistic movement

as encompassing literature and the visual arts in Britain as well as on the Continent.

In *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, which is preserved in the Sōseki Library and, on which, Sōseki is thought to have grounded his understanding of the meaning of Symbolism,<sup>11</sup> Symons identifies the central characteristics of the Symbolist movement in his introductory chapter, quoting Thomas Carlyle's definition of the meaning of "symbol" in *Sartor Resartus* :

"In the symbol proper, what we call a symbol, there is, more or less distinctly and directly, some embodiment and revelation of the infinite ; the infinite is made to blend with the finite, to stand visible, or as it were, attainable there." It is such a sense as this that the word symbolism has been used to describe a movement which, during the last generation, has profoundly influenced the course of French literature. (Symons 3)

Jean Moreas suggests that the subject matter of the new literary movement is no longer external nature for its own sake, but rather the "idea," and this suggestion led him to develop three supplementary points : to define the ideas ; to explain its relationship to the objective, mundane world, and establish a new formal structure by which the idea would be best expressed.

In an elaborated definition of pictorial Symbolism provided by Albert Aurier, he attributed five characteristics to the new art : ideist, symbolist, synthetic, subjective and decorative. These characteristics have an affinity with the literary symbolist manifestos of Symons and Moreas, in the use of symbol as a physical manifestation of the Idea, as the subjective apprehension of the relationship between external objects and the Idea, that is "objectification of the subjective" (Stevens 52).

Sōseki, in his article with reference to a symbol as a method of expressing an "idea," appears to echo the definitions of symbolism provided by Arthur Symons, Jean Moreas and Albert Aurier. Regarding the way of describing things,



Sōseki asserts in his lecture “Sōsaku-ka no Taido” [“The Attitude of a Creative Writer,” 1908]<sup>12</sup> :

Although I try terribly hard, I cannot fully express them. If I have proved that I cannot make it, that is it and it is all finished. However, if I still try further to express even only one out of ten, I will definitely need to use a symbol. Using a symbol helps to describe the one out of the ten.... In order that we may objectify this deep, infinite and complex subject-matter of the feeling, we need to try to have the one represent the entire ten and to have this one symbol suggest the existence of the remaining nine parts. (16 : 203-204, translation mine)

Sōseki’s “definition” of Symbolist paintings is also seen in his article about the paintings exhibited at the Bunten Exhibition [The Ministry of Education Art Museum Exhibition]. He referred to the two calm and quiet type paintings *Kawa no Fuchi* [Riverside] and *Mame no Aki* [*Bean’s Autumn*] in “Bunten to Geijyutsu” [“The Ministry of Education Art Museum Exhibition and Art,” 1912]<sup>13</sup> :

I believe that there must be something hidden behind this calm and quiet life. And I want to explore further to see if the hidden part is black or red, which should lead to giving some depth to the painting. Indeed the depth does not mean only the light and shade painted by the brush tip, but by the depth of the spirit, and therefore this kind of paintings can be called a painting leading us to the meditation, or a Symbolist painting or religious painting. (16 : 534, translation mine)

Sōseki suggests that the use of a symbol should help to make the indefinite stand visible or attainable. Highly esteeming the painting *Hope* by George Frederic Watts, which he actually must have seen at the National Gallery of British Art during his stay in London<sup>14</sup>, Sōseki recognizes the reason for the existence of Symbolism as a dominating artistic movement. Regarding Watts as a Symbolist

painter, Sōseki writes in *Bungaku Ron* [*A Theory of Literature*, 1907]<sup>15</sup> :

Watts' masterpiece *Hope* shows that he skillfully made embodiment and revelation of the intangible and abstract concept of "hope." When we look into the methods the painter used, we realize that he only added this symbolic allegory. (14 : 246, translation mine)

Sōseki's references to Symbolism reveal that he must have found it effective to use the programme of Symbolism for his creative writing. In order to express the intangible character of his heroine, Mineko, in *Sanshiro*, Sōseki used the girls painted by Greuze and the repeated images of the girls with both fear and fascination, which can be now attributed to Sōseki's application of the programme of Symbolism, his contemporary artistic climate.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has studied the relation between Sōseki's *Sanshiro* and Symbolism and has sought to elucidate the way the programme of Symbolism may have infiltrated Sōseki's *Sanshiro*. It has clarified Sōseki's keen interest in the Western art, his adoption of Greuze's girls with "angelic hypocrisy" or "natural duplicity" for the "unconscious hypocrite" image of Mineko, their kinship with the girls typical of the Symbolist motifs, and his understanding and use of the programme of Symbolism with regard to his stylistic principle of eschewing detailed descriptions and preferring effective use of symbolic allusions. It is concluded that Sōseki applies the programme of Symbolism as well as its motifs for the effective portrayal of the intangible character of his heroine Mineko in *Sanshiro*.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> All Japanese names are given in Japanese order : surname first. Natsume Sōseki is the pen-name of Natsume Kinnosuke. He is hereinafter referred to as Sōseki, as is customary in Japan.

<sup>2</sup> See my essays “Sōseki and the Wallace Collection,” *Eigakushi Kenkyu* 31, 1998 and “Sōseki’s Adoption of Greuze’s Paintings for the Creation of Mineko’s Image,” *Bulletin of Ikuei Junior College* 17, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Sōseki was part of the first wave of the Meiji intellectuals who were sent to Western countries by the Japanese government in the hope of carrying out the successful modernization of Japan.

<sup>4</sup> The parenthetical citations refer to *Sōseki Zenshu*. [The Complete Works of Sōseki] 29 vols. Figures indicate volume : page. The volume number may be omitted where obvious or repetitious.

<sup>5</sup> Sōseki revealed in the interview his intention to portray a heroine for *Sanshiro* modelled on the character Felicitas in *Es War* (1894), which Sōseki had read as *The Undying Past*, B. Marshall, trans. London : J. Lane, 1906. He labelled the character type of Felicitas as an “unconscious hypocrite,” a woman who pursues a man without any feelings of guilt through unconscious and instinctive exploitation of her charms.

<sup>6</sup> This point has been argued before by Haga Tōru (1990) in “Natsume Sōseki : Kaiga no Ryobun,” *Kaiga no Ryobun* [*The Domain of Art*], Tokyo : Asahi Shimbunsha.

<sup>7</sup> Sōseki made notes, intending to search for a universally valid formula applicable both to Western and Eastern literary phenomena. His notebooks reached the thickness of five or six inches during his stay in England, based on which *A Theory of Literature* was later published in 1907. His letter to his father-in-law Nakane Shigekazu, shows that Sōseki started to make the notes around March 1901 (22 : 253).

<sup>8</sup> By comparative studies over the last few decades, it has been revealed that Sōseki received strong artistic inspirations from the Pre-Raphaelites, especially from Rossetti. Among chief achievements in this issue are : Etō Jun (1975) *Sōseki to Āsā-O Densetsu* [*Sōseki and the Arthurian Legend*], Tokyo : University of Tokyo Press ; Haga Tōru (1990), Yoon Sang In (1994) *Seiki-matsu to Sōseki* [*Fin de Siècle and Sōseki*], Tokyo : Iwanami Shoten.

<sup>9</sup> Rossetti, H. M. Madox (1902) *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, London : H. Virtue.

<sup>10</sup> First published in *The Shinsei* [*New Voice*], Nov. 1906.

<sup>11</sup> Sōseki suggested *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* as a reference book for a Symbolist when he gave a lecture at the University of Tokyo in 1903. This lecture was later published in *Eibungaku Keishiki Ron* [*A Formal Theory of English Literature*] in 1924.

<sup>12</sup> First published in *The Hototogisu* in April, 1908.

<sup>13</sup> First published in *The Asahi* in October 1912.

<sup>14</sup> The display of Watts’ *Hope* at the National Gallery of British Art during Sōseki’s stay

in London can be confirmed in the two museum catalogues: *Descriptive and Pictorial Catalogue of the Pictures and Sculptures in the National Gallery of British Art; with Biographical Notices of the Deceased Artists*, 6th ed. (1900) & 9th ed. (1902).

<sup>15</sup> First published in May 1907 by Ōkura Shoten.

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- (2002年9月26日 受理)

# 『三四郎』と西洋絵画——漱石によるシンボリズムプログラムの応用

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## 概 要

本稿は夏目漱石(1867-1916)の『三四郎』(1908)と西洋絵画との関係を探っている。漱石作品への視覚芸術の影響については近年さまざまな研究が行われているものの、『三四郎』へのシンボリズムのプログラム応用については、今なお十分な研究が行われていないのが現状である。本稿は、『三四郎』のヒロイン美禰子像形成への漱石のシンボリズムプログラムの応用を明らかにすることを主眼とし、漱石の西洋絵画への強い関心、ジャン・バプティスト・グルーズ(1725-1805)が描いた少女像と『三四郎』のヒロイン美禰子像との関連性、さらに典型的なシンボリストモチーフで描かれた女性像との近似性、そして作品へのシンボリズムプログラム応用へと漱石を導くこととなったシンボリズムに対する漱石の理解と共感についての四部構成で論じている。