


Using the Sociology of Literature as a Method to Understand Japanese Culture: The Case Study of *Botchan* by Natsume Sōseki

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Abstract

This paper does not attempt to breathe a new life into the sociology of literature. The real concern here is limited to making a possible contribution to the work conducted in Japanese language and literature departments by using the sociology of literature as a method. The discussion begins with a summary of the sociology of literature, merely to make clear the basic characteristics of the method developed by well-known intellectuals. Then the novel *Botchan* is taken as an example for the suggested approach.

Keywords

Sociology of literature, Japanese literature, Natsume Sōseki, *Botchan*, Japanese culture

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This paper begins with a brief summary of the historical development of the sociology of literature. It then considers the possibility of applying this method to Japanese studies in Japanese language and literature departments; Natsume Sōseki's famous novel *Botchan* is used as an example, while inviting the reader to further sociological studies in other genres of literature. To conclude, the benefits of examining society, culture, and history through literary works are considered.

The Sociology of Literature

The idea of the sociology of literature, as Leenhardt stresses, may be said to be completely expressed in the title of Madame de Staël's *De la Littérature considérée dans ses Rapports avec les Institutions Sociales* (1810) (Leenhardt, 1967: 517). This study may help classify present-day research in the field of the sociology of literature, because she inaugurated a sociological tradition

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which never precisely defined the relationship between society and literature, or between society and the writer, although it affirmed the existence of such a relationship (Leenhardt, 1967: 518).

According to Leenhardt, the real importance ascribed to the sociological approach to literature was not present until 1957, when Löwenthal's *Literature and the Image of Man* and Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* were published (Leenhardt, 1967: 519). Watt studied eighteenth-century English literature, particularly Defoe, Richardson and Fielding, the first three English novelists. Leenhardt notes that the authors being of the same generation was not a mere coincidence. Moreover, their genius alone could not have created a new literary form (the novel) unless there had also been particularly favourable literary and social conditions (Leenhardt, 1967: 519). Here, attention must be drawn to the fact that these writers are not always noted for their realism. On the contrary, Watt emphasises that "the novel's realism does not reside in the kind of life it presents, but in the way it presents it" (Watt, 1957: II, Leenhardt, 1967: 520).

On the other hand, Leenhardt declares that, in Germany, there is a philosophical and sociological tradition which is directed to a much greater extent towards the sociology of literature. For example, the Marxist writers like F. Mehring defines the conception of the relationship between social structures and literary work as follows: "The ideology heritage also exercises an influence, which has never been denied by historical materialism; but its effect is simply like that of the sun, the rain, and the wind on a tree which is rooted in the rough soil of material conditions, modes of economic production and social situation." (Leenhardt, 1967: 522).

Leenhardt affirms that, in *The Theory of the Novel*, Lukács regards the novel as the characteristic literary form of a world in which man never feels entirely a part nor entirely a stranger. There is a community in the novel, as in all epics, but unlike the epic, the novel also takes into account the radical opposition between man and the world, between the individual and society (Leenhardt, 1967: 523–524). He states that the French sociological tradition took a very different turn under the influence of Comte and Durkheim (Leenhardt, 1967: 527).

It is worth noting that Guyau (1889: 65) considers the work of art as a whole, as a system to discover the significant facts expressive of a law, those which, among the confused mass of phenomena, constitute points of reference and form a link, a pattern, a figure, a system (Leenhardt, 1967: 527). For Guyau, society is important before all else, but only inasmuch as it appears in the structure of the work, as a system of points of reference (*ibid.*).

English gives a very good example to describe the situation of the sociology of literature in the 1990s. According to him, a search for the "sociology of literature" on Amazon shows that no primers have been published since the 1990s, and that conferences or panels on the sociology of literature are nonexistent, at least from the perspective of scholars of literature (English, 2010: vii).

Using the Method in Japanese Education

Up to this point, the general feature of the sociology of literature through its historical development has been briefly described. The following three remarks may be added in order to understand why including the sociology of literature in Japanese language and literature studies may be considered as a contribution to the field.

Firstly, Umberto Eco says that one can take a literary work simply as documentary evidence of an historical period; one can consider the social element as the explanatory cause of the aesthetic solution adopted for a literary work; and one may also invent a dialectic between two points of view (the work as an aesthetic phenomenon and society as its explanatory context) in which, on the one hand, the social element explains each aesthetic choice that has been made, and, on the other, a study of the work and of its structural features leads to a clearer understanding of the state of a society (Eco, 1967: 551).

Secondly, Ural points out that literary works not only reflect a certain period's thought and perception, but also the ideology of the writer. Ural stresses that the literary work can be useful for understanding how the intellectuals of the time (when the literary work was written) dealt with the problems and with the history of thought of their times (Ural, 2009: 57–58).

Thirdly, Eagleton justifies the sociology of literature in two main ways: realist and pragmatist. According to the first justification, literature is in fact deeply conditioned by its social context, and any critical account of it which omits this fact is therefore automatically deficient. As for the second, Eagleton states that literature is in fact shaped by all kinds of factors, and readability in all social determinants is useful and desirable from a particular standpoint (Eagleton, 1988, p. 469). He continues to argue that a “sociological” critic can be a pragmatist about both history and literature together, a realist about history but a pragmatist about literature, or a realist about them both (Eagleton, 1988: 470).

In sum, applying the sociology of literature approach to Japanese education for undergraduate and Master courses gives the opportunity to the Japanese language learner to form a general opinion on Japanese culture, society and history, as well as literature. At this point, Natsume Sōseki's *Botchan* (1906) can be suggested as a good example. Also, other genres of literature, such as short stories and poems, may be considered as teaching materials. Considering the schedule of the literature classes in the departments of Japanese language and literature in Turkey, for example Erciyes University, the undergraduate courses on Japanese literature last 14 weeks, 2 classes (45 minutes each) per week, in each semester. As time is short, novels could be replaced with short stories. The following three short stories are worth mentioning for their writers, the era, and their themes. *Hana* (*The Nose*, 1916) by Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, *Chūmon no Ōi Ryōriten* (*The Restaurant of Many Orders*, 1924) by Miyazawa Kenji, and *Yūkoku* (*Patriotism*, 1961) by Mishima Yukio. These short stories can provide the students with knowledge not only of the stories themselves but also the historical and social facts about Japan, the writers' standpoints, and the ways of thinking and feeling in Japanese society when these short stories were written.

Through *Hana*, the reader can gain familiarity with the ways of thinking of a Buddhist practitioner and some Japanese people of the Heian Period. Not only the fantastic peculiarity but also the psychological themes of the story may attract the reader's attention. As the feelings of egoism and vanity are universal, foreign readers would easily be able to understand the story. Similarly *Chūmon no Ōi Ryōriten*, another remarkable short story, can provide clues about Miyazawa Kenji's way of thinking as a writer and a Japanese intellectual about modern life in Japan, global justice, animal rights, and so on.

As for *Yūkoku*, a realistic historical approach is possible. This short story is based on a event occurring in 1936 which enables the reader to understand the Emperor's significance in Japan, the Japanese view of patriotism which can be seen through the main character's *seppuku*, the status of women in Japanese society, and so on.

Selecting different periods in time makes it possible to give general knowledge of the different ways of thinking and feeling in Japanese society, while choosing the same era but different writers' short stories can be beneficial to observe the variety in the social thought.

As for poetry, as a poet's ego is not only his/her ego, it can reflect the society's thoughts, as Lancon (Leenhardt, 1967: 529) stresses. For instance, a famous Japanese poet, Tawara Machi may be considered as the voice of the well-educated, Japanese ladies living in modern cities in the twentieth century.

Natsume Sōseki and the Meiji Era (1868–1912)

Yoshimoto states (2001: 10) that Natsume Sōseki (1867–1916) is one of the elite writers of the Meiji Era's Japanese literary world. He mentions Natsume as the kind of writer born only once

in a century. On the other hand, as Norma Field has remarked (Brodey and Tsunematsu, 2000: 3), Sōseki differed from other masters of Japanese modern literature in that he was a popular writer who “touched upon popular concerns in an accessible manner.”

Natsume Sōseki graduated from Tokyo Imperial University in 1893, with a bachelor’s degree in English literature. He continued his studies in English literature at University College in London between 1901 and 1903, sponsored by a Japanese government scholarship. It can be said that he not only travelled to England but also learned about the Western culture through his travels in the pages of the literary works he read.

Sōseki wrote twenty-two novels in eleven years. His first book, *Wagahai wa Neko de aru (I am a Cat)*, was published in 1905. The unfinished novel *Mei An (Light and Darkness)* (1916) was his last published work.

It should be added that Natsume Sōseki was born in 1867, just one year before the Meiji Era began. When Sōseki died in 1916, only four years had passed since the end of the Meiji Era. Therefore, it is not an exaggeration to claim that this writer is one of the intellectuals of his time in whose novels social, cultural, and historical facts were reflected, either consciously or unconsciously but realistically. In short, having witnessed the Meiji Era’s social and cultural events, Natsume Sōseki can be regarded as a representative of the era he lived in.

Esenbel (2003: 11) states that Natsume Sōseki dealt with the problems of the middle-class Meiji Era intellectuals which even today many Japanese continue to face. He is the writer of Japan’s new capital city Tokyo, in which he was born; the city used to be known as Edo, the Shōguns’ capital city. Brodey and Tsunematsu (2000: 3) remark that people read Sōseki in order to understand Japan at this crucial moment of confrontation with the West and with modernisation.

What is most important in choosing this novel is the main character Botchan’s peculiar personality. Koyano (2003: 5) stresses that everyone is different from each other. It is Botchan who persistently emphasises this fact. Traditionally, the role of education was to convince a person that he/she is nothing more than a person in the crowd, and therefore should be humble. However, Botchan does not agree with this kind of education. If the idea that everyone is different is taken seriously, a community cannot be realised by ignoring diversities. A civilisation is created by acknowledging such difference. The novel *Botchan* attacks this contradiction directly.

A Brief Summary of *Botchan*

Botchan, one of the most widely read novels in Japan, is about a young teacher (Botchan) who starts his job at a school in Matsuyama, Shikoku. Botchan, who has lived exclusively in Tokyo up to that point in his life, suffers in this small city. As he could not find convenient means of communication with his colleagues, students, and the local people, it is not an exaggeration to say that his new life is like a bad dream for him. He only feels well while writing letters to Kiyō, who took care of him during his childhood like a mother. Botchan, unhappy with his work and feeling alienated from his colleagues, eventually resigns from his work and returns to Tokyo. He surprisingly takes on a new job as an assistant mechanic at Tokyo Tramcar Company with a low salary, a job which does not even have the slightest relation with the profession of a teacher. However, it allows him a way to survive his new life. *Botchan* reflects not only Botchan’s psychological situation and experience at his new job, but also a well-educated modern Meiji Era elitist who suffers in a small traditional city.

The Botchan Character

Botchan’s character not only represents his personality but also the social characteristics of the era in which he lived. Hirano Toshio (Koyano, 2003: 6, 7) says that Botchan is the character that

symbolises the Edo Era which was destroyed by the modernising movements of the Meiji Era. Kiyō, according to Botchan, plays the role as a protector of the values of the Edo Era which preceded the Meiji Period.

In the same fashion, Karatani Kōjin (Koyano, 2003: 7) claims that Botchan and Yamaarashi (Porcupine) symbolise the masculine world while Akashatsu (Red shirt) and Nodaiko (the clown) symbolise the feminine world. He thinks they resemble the Eastern and the Western cultures, which are juxtaposed in the novel.

Ideology is felt in the way that a language is used. In this novel, the first-person narrative of Botchan speaks with an Edo dialect. Moreover, the plot in *Botchan* is divided into two parts, like the good and the evil plots in the literary works of the Edo Era. The opposition is between the defeated Edo, represented by the world of the past, and the winning Meiji Era, represented by the modern world (Koyano, 2003: 7).

In addition, Botchan, a newcomer in town, never feels like he is a part of the society in the school in which he works as a teacher. He does not feel entirely like a stranger either; he attempts to get involved by improving the school. Therefore, this novel reflects the social reality and the ways of thinking of the era; while Yamaarashi reflects a sense of justice, as in the samurai codes, Akashatsu reflects the Western ideals of the twentieth century.

Some subjects in the novel, such as the way the students think, the way they dress, etc., can work simply as documentary evidence of the Meiji Era.

Botchan's dilemma between remaining as *Edokko* and adapting himself as a teacher in the new system can be considered as a fact that he is conscious of his own identity. This is what can be thought of as Sōseki's mode of thought and the dilemma of the Meiji Era intellectuals under the cultural influence of the West.

To sum up, the essential reasons for the writer choosing *Botchan* as teaching material are as follows:

Sōseki, a writer who witnessed the entire Meiji Era, put his experience and thoughts in his famous novel, *Botchan*. The social conflict between these two eras can be seen through his characters. While Botchan represents the Edo Era, with his Edo dialect and his *Edokko* behaviour, Akashatsu and Nodaiko symbolise the westernised Japan.

Sōseki's criticism of social events is worth mentioning as he lived in England for three years, which was rare for a Japanese person in those times. *Botchan* vividly draws a realistic picture of the late Edo Period, the Meiji Era, and the conflict of the Japanese people in the so-called changes in the Meiji Era. This novel therefore may be considered as an ideal book by which to study the sociology of literature.

Conclusion

Literary works may be viewed as the distorted mirrors of the time in which they were written; the ways of thinking and feeling of the time and the modes of thought of the creators are reflected. Therefore, a literary work may provide the reader with knowledge of the writer's thoughts and feelings. As the writer is a part of the community of the era in which he/she lives, the intellectual trends of his/her time, or at least a reflection of them, these traits can also be found in their novels. For instance, *Botchan* (1906), the first novel written by Natsume Sōseki, presents an abundant amount of knowledge not only about the writer himself but also about the peculiarities of the late Meiji Era. The main theme is morality. It portrays the dilemma within the protagonist Botchan, and also between the secondary character Yamaarashi and the antagonist Akashatsu. The dilemma of morality reflects not only Sōseki's personal experience but also the confusion of Meiji Era intellectuals with regard to Western culture and conceptions regarding the Japanese way of thinking. Therefore, this novel may provide the reader with cultural and historical knowledge.

Even though there are almost no new publications, the sociology of literature can be used as a method in Japanese language and literature departments, since literary works represent the culture, society, and the characteristics of the era vividly. Considering the duration of the course, or the interest of the learner, not only novels but also short stories and poems can be taken as teaching materials.

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