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## Individual and Society: Natsume Sôseki and the Literature of the Early 20th Century

by [About Japan Editors](#)

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Grade Level

[Secondary](#)

Historical Period

[Meiji \(1868-1912\)](#)

Subject Area

[English and Language Arts](#)

Theme

[Imperial Japan](#)

Topic

[Literature](#)

[War & Conflict](#)

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### Background Information.

During the Meiji period, the Japanese government fought two wars, both over control of areas in and around Korea. Japan achieved a clear victory in the Sino-Japanese War against China (1894-1895) and fought Russia to a cease-fire in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905). Both the government and popular opinion viewed the outcome of the Russo-Japanese War, negotiated by Theodore Roosevelt, as a victory for Japan. While both wars created a patriotic fervor that was important in the creation of a national identity during the Meiji period, the apparent victory in the latter also encouraged a sense that Japan had "arrived" after several decades of reform during which the government demanded sacrifice and service to the national cause. Many literary works from the decade following the Russo-Japanese War thus include reflections on the present state of society and on what had been gained or lost during the previous decades. The place of the individual in the changing society remained an important issue, and the perspectives from which writers examined the issue deepened.

Natsume Sôseki, one of the most important writers of the early twentieth century, wrote acutely about the generational division that appeared as a consequence of education and the strikingly different experiences of people born before and after the Meiji Restoration (1868). Sôseki and other writers also asked whether individualism and ambition benefited or harmed individuals and society as a whole, and whether the expectation that the individual would serve the nation was an indispensable restraint on individualism or a fetter that harmed what it was meant to protect.

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### Learning Goals.

1. Students will know that after the Russo-Japanese War writers began to reflect on the changes in Japanese society that were the result of several decades of government-sponsored reforms.
  2. Students will see that some writers, such as Sôseki, considered the place of the individual in the new society through the lens of the problem of youth.
  3. Students will understand how the melancholic humor of *Sanshirô* reflects Sôseki's ambivalent attitude toward the new society and the generation that was born into it.
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### Standards.

#### Language Arts

1. **McRel Standard 5.** [Uses the general skills and strategies of the reading process.](#)
2. **McRel Standard 6.** [Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of literary texts.](#)
3. **McRel Standard 8.** [Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes.](#)

## World History

1. **McRel Standard 36.** Understands patterns of global change in the era of Western military and economic dominance from 1800 to 1914.
2. **McRel Standard 37.** Understand major global trends from 1750 to 1914.
3. **McRel Standard 38.** Understands reform, revolution, and social change in the world economy of the early 20th century.
4. **McRel Standard 42.** Understands major global trends from 1900 to the end of World War II.

### Key Concept.

Certain literature during this period reflects and illustrates the complex conflicts, both psychological and societal, that came to the surface in the early 20th century as a result of rapid change after the Meiji Restoration.

### Essential Question.

How does the work of Natsume Sôseki reflect the impact of broader changes in Japanese society on the individual?

### Thought Questions.

1. What does Hirota mean when he tells Sanshirô that "the inside of your head" is bigger than Japan? Why does he admonish Sanshirô, "Don't ever surrender yourself—not to Japan, not to anything"? (Page 15)
2. Why does Sanshirô feel he lives in "three worlds"? Are these worlds different places, different times, or different ways of imagining his future? Why does the first world of Kumamoto and his mother seem distant both in space and in time? (Pages 62-64)
3. Sanshirô seems to agree with the woman on the train when she calls him a "coward" (Page 9), but is the solution to his problems simply to be courageous or bold? Why does Sanshirô have such an ambivalent attitude toward what happens around him?

## Activities

### Focus Activity Ideas.

Choose a policy change at your school that students reacted strongly to. Have students write one paragraph describing their reaction to the policy change. Use this exercise to focus students on the issues of how individuals react to societal change.

### Main Lesson Activity Ideas.

1. Lecture on the cultural climate in Japan after the Russo-Japanese War
  - A. role of the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese Wars in the creation of a national identity
  - B. reassessments after the Russo-Japanese War of the reforms and the demands placed on the people since the Meiji Restoration
  - C. Soseki's view that generations were diverging in their views of the world
  - D. Soseki's ambivalent view of individualism
2. Discussion of the novel based on thought questions listed below.

What does Hirota mean when he tells Sanshiro that "the inside of your head" is bigger than Japan? Why does he admonish Sanshirô, "Don't ever surrender yourself—not to Japan, not to anything"? (page 15)

Why does Sanshirô feel he lives in "three worlds"? Are these worlds different places, different times,

or different ways of imagining his future? Why does the first world of Kumamoto and his mother seem distant both in space and in time? (pages 62-64)

Sanshirô seems to agree with the woman on the train when she calls him a "coward" (9), but is the solution to his problems simply to be courageous or bold? Why does Sanshirô have such an ambivalent attitude toward what happens around him?

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### Summative Activity Ideas.

Have students write a brief diary entry as Sanshirô reflecting on his three biggest concerns about early 20th-century Japanese society.

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### Resources.

Natsume Sôseki, *Sanshirô*, trans. Jay Rubin (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, 2002), 3-16, 62-4. The first excerpt is chapter one of the novel. The second excerpt is from chapter four and begins "Three worlds took shape for Sanshiro" at the bottom of page 62, ending with "For in fact he was not so dissatisfied as all that with his one-woman scheme" on page 64.

Jay Rubin, "Sanshirô and Sôseki: A Critical Essay," *Sanshiro*, trans. Jay Rubin (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, 2002), 213-48. (In addition to providing helpful background on Sôseki and his work, this essay examines Sôseki's use of imagery and his treatment of psychology.)

Entitled *Sanshirô* in Japanese, after the first name of the central character, this novel was published in 1908 by Natsume Sôseki, one of the most important figures in early twentieth-century literature. Sôseki is a penname, and one conventionally refers to the author by the penname rather than his family name Natsume.

Unlike his many country-born characters, Sôseki (1867-1916) was born in Edo (now Tokyo), and the urbane humor of many of his novels (including *Sanshirô*) reflects his background. Sôseki attended prestigious Tokyo University and after graduating taught English in two provincial "higher schools," public preparatory schools whose curriculum included part of what is now college study. (At the beginning of the novel *Sanshirô* has just graduated from one of the higher schools—translated as "college"—where Sôseki taught.) He was sent by the government to study in England and upon his return began teaching English literature at Tokyo University. He left the university in 1907 to become the literary editor of the *Asahi* newspaper.

Although Sôseki did not begin writing fiction until 1904, he is often identified with the Meiji period (1868-1912) as a whole. Born a year before the Meiji Restoration, he lived the era's changes and his works display a critical and often skeptical attitude toward the transformation of Japanese society. Novels such as *Kokoro*, published in 1914, are quite dark and reveal a melancholic view of both the individual and modern Japan.

*Sanshirô* is the first in a trilogy of novels that continued in *And Then* (1909) and *The Gate* (1910). Although the characters in each differ, they focus respectively on a university student, a thirty-year old, and a man nearing middle age, and thus have youth and aging as a common theme, set against the broader changes in Japan. *Sanshirô* examines the problem of youth from a number of angles. The novel begins with Sanshirô's journey from rural Kumamoto to Tokyo, an iconic journey from the country to the city made by many young people in the Meiji period. Even on the trip he quickly realizes that the world of his childhood is long behind. He first encounters an unusually forward woman, with whom he uneasily shares a bed (pages 3-9), and then strikes up a conversation with a man later revealed to be a teacher at a higher school in Tokyo named Hirota. If the woman stuns Sanshirô with her boldness, Hirota stuns him with his irreverence toward the programs of national mobilization of Meiji Japan (pages 11-16). Hirota's declaration that Tokyo is bigger than Kumamoto, that Japan is bigger than Tokyo, and that "Even bigger than Japan...is the inside of your head" (page 15) is one of the best known passages of the novel.

The diffident astonishment with which Sanshirô reacts to the woman and Hirota is compounded when he ventures onto the university campus in chapter two. There he looks up the cousin of a family friend, a scientist named Nonomiya, who spends most of his time in a basement studying the pressure of light, and by chance sees a beautiful young woman who he later discovers is a friend of Nonomiya's sister. Sanshirô does not know what to make of either Nonomiya or the girl. He remains attracted to both learning and women without knowing how to approach either; indeed, Sôseki seems to define the problem of modern youth as the problem of ambition accompanied neither by means nor ends.

Sanshirô's meditation on his "three worlds" (pages 62-64), another important passage from the novel, reveals the powerful pull each "world" exerts, the difficulty he has choosing among them, and his own frustration in finding a path for himself. Yojiro, who is mentioned at the beginning of the passage, is a fellow student.

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