

Andrew Kokesh

May 10<sup>th</sup>, 2006

Professor Miyake

JPNT 179 – Manga

## Shōnen Manga Final Paper

While it may seem obvious to say that manga has become a thriving industry in Japan, it also must be noted that the shōnen (boys) genre may well be what made Japanese comics what they are today. In the early 1950s the comics that gave birth to the modern manga industry, largely written by Osamu Tezuka, were primarily shōnen stories. They were action-packed, featured strange new worlds, and heroes whom the average boy could idolize. Today, the shōnen genre is still running strong. Weekly sales for the top five Japanese boys' comic magazines add up to almost nine million copies.<sup>1</sup> Despite the changing times for other genres of the manga industry there are many themes that are still quite commonplace for shōnen. When comparing some of the oldest shōnen series, such as *Tetsuwan Atomu*, to some of the newest and most popular manga in the world there are still many common elements in the heroes they feature. The amazing settings that these authors conceive and portray are able to take their readers to worlds they have never imagined. Even the humor, which is almost just an added bonus, is enough to make the average reader burst out laughing in

---

<sup>1</sup> Schodt, Page 14

public. Although the industry is changing and new manga are appearing everyday, many of the common elements of shōnen have already stood the test of time and will stick around for the generations to come.

The main character of a shōnen comic is perhaps the most important element to creating a manga that readers feel like they can either idolize or connect with. In most shōnen manga stories there are two different kinds of heroes. The first kind of hero is the Superman type. This kind of character is one that exemplifies many of the different characteristics that the Japanese value in their heroes. He is strong, determined, never gives up, and is very hardworking. A subtype of this kind of hero is the underdog. Despite the fact that the chips are clearly stacked against him, his hard work and perseverance eventually guide him to victory, no matter what the odds. The other kind of shōnen hero is the kind that the average shōnen reader can relate to. Instead of being an idealized hero he is more flawed and more human. Most frequently he is loud and obnoxious, a little dumb, and pretty clumsy. Yet, despite all of the shortcomings of this type of main character he still often has many things in common with the more conventional type.

Goku of the *Dragonball* and *Dragonball Z* series is a prime example of the Superman type of hero. He is incredibly powerful, but he is not always the strongest character in the story. Yet, Goku was not born incredibly powerful; he trains hard and unleashes his potential by fighting to protect the people he cares about. Over and over again in the story he manages to overcome the odds by being resolute, never backing down, and always rising

to the occasion. He is not necessarily invincible (he does die later in the story, only to keep fighting anyway).

Tobio, also known as Astro Boy, of the Osamu Tezuka manga *Tetsuwan Atomu* also shows many of the characteristics of the Superman type hero. With his amazing powers Astro Boy always seems to save the city and the people he cares about from any danger. He is reliable and strong, the kind of hero people can depend on.

Although the Superman hero is a frequent type of character, just as common is the underdog. Makunouchi Ippo of the George Morikawa boxing manga *Hajime no Ippo* epitomizes the underdog type. The story follows a shy and weak high school boy who takes up the sport when he is saved from a group of bullies by a boxer. The manga follows his journey from the very beginning, getting his boxing license, to his rise to the Japanese featherweight title belt and his journey to challenge the best boxers in the world. In almost every single one of his fights Ippo makes an incredible comeback victory that seems nearly impossible. Readers of this type of shōnen sports manga delight in characters like this. Even when he becomes the champion and begins defending his belt he still manages to become the underdog via a variety of circumstances. One might think that this rise to fame and glory would make a shy and modest character become obsessed with fame and fortune, but not so for Ippo. Despite being the strongest person in his weight class and his huge popularity, he still remains mostly the same person. He is shy and modest, but at the same time is compassionate and caring for the people around him. In the ring his hard work and extreme

perseverance exemplify many of the Superman type values, yet outside of the ring he shows the kind of ideals that people should have in every day life.

The last type of main character is the kind that the average shōnen reader can identify with, and therefore become more immersed in the story. Masashi Kishimoto's title character of the manga *Naruto* is a good example of this type. *Naruto* is the story of a hyperactive adolescent ninja named Uzumaki Naruto who is striving to be a first-class ninja. Naruto is far from a perfect hero. He is clumsy, loud, foolish, and a little perverted (somewhat common in shōnen). Part of what makes Naruto more successful as a main character than a character like Goku is his fallibility. Although Naruto is usually strong enough to defeat his opponents he is far from the strongest character in the manga. A loud obnoxious ninja in a coming of age story is something that readers can identify with more and relate to in a way that simply cannot happen with a Superman hero like Goku.

Hanamichi Sakuragi from Inoue Takehiko's manga *Slam Dunk* is another example of this less than ideal hero. The manga follows Sakuragi's journey from being a complete basketball rookie to playing for the national championship. Hanamichi begins the story as a gang leader and as a bit of a screw up, especially with girls (he is famous for being rejected more than 50 times). It is particularly hard for him to learn to play basketball, despite his natural athleticism, because he is extremely arrogant. When attempting to learn a lay-up he is uninterested, calling it a "commoner's shot" because he only wants to do slam dunks. Despite his apparent disdain for the sport, he actually works very hard at it and ends up becoming a major contributor to

the team. Most of the time, Hanamichi may not be the kind of character that people would normally look up to, but his redeeming qualities make him endearing, despite his many faults.

Depending on what kind of story an author is going for the type of main character will change. For an action packed story with a lot of fighting and not too much else a Superman type is probably the best kind of character. Yet, for a story that follows the journey of a character from just a beginner to someone really good either an underdog or a goofy hero is probably best. Although these characters may differ in a few respects they still have a lot in common. All of them are hardworking, because it would be pretty uninteresting to see someone who is naturally good at something succeed without any effort. And most importantly all of them are very persistent. No matter what the odds, if any shōnen hero gives 100% effort he will almost always achieve victory.

If a hero can be considered the most important element to a shōnen manga then of nearly equal importance is the environment in which he exists. Setting is particularly important to shōnen manga because of its purpose and the way it is read. The stereotypical shōnen reader is a kid of around age 10. After a hard day at school he can come home to open up his new shōnen manga magazine and be transported to a completely different world. The highly imaginative worlds of the average boy's manga are able to help one completely escape the rigors and troubles of everyday life. Even for the salary man on a subway on his way to work can crack open a magazine or book and completely forget where he is. Shōnen authors can create

completely new worlds or show a completely new side to a world that they thought they knew.

In Eiichiro Oda's incredibly popular manga *One Piece*, the story follows a group of pirates in a world totally unlike our own. The main premise of the story is that the main character Luffy is searching for a fantastic treasure in what is known as the Great Age of Pirates. Most of the world in *One Piece* is covered in water and most of the villages and cities exist on isolated islands. Pirates dominate the seas but are constantly kept at bay by the Marines, the military arm of the World Government. Part of what makes *One Piece* so successful is the complete unrealism and fantastic nature of the worlds the pirates visit. In one chapter they may be on an island that is completely covered by desert, in another they will find themselves in a world where everything is about ten times larger than it should be, or on another island that floats on a cloud in the sky. The completely out of this world settings that Oda creates make it easy to forget you are reading a story and not there yourself.

In a sports manga like *Hajime no Ippo* the story takes place in a completely normal world, but shows a side of it that most people have never seen. Since the story follows Ippo in his journey from a complete novice to becoming a professional boxer the reader gets a glimpse of what the boxing world is like from the point of view of a beginner. Through the manga one can see how difficult weight management can be, what kind of difficult training boxers go through, and the kind of nerves that boxers can have before big fights. Although the story takes place in the real world the story is

able to give the reader an insider's glimpse on the world of boxing. The realism that Morikawa uses in depicting the sport is another part of what makes the manga so interesting. The author uses a range of real techniques and special punches that are used in the actual sport and frequently makes references to famous pro boxers. Being transported to the world of boxing can be just as enveloping as going to another planet.

*Slam Dunk* is another example of a manga that gets fleshed out as a story because of its setting. Since the story follows a high school basketball team, an important part of the story is the character's time while in classes and at school. More than being just a sports manga, and concentrating only on practices and games, the manga also shows how the characters spend their time off the basketball court. Other manga that take place primarily at school mostly feature comedy or romantic stories. Because *Slam Dunk* is more than just sports it draws a lot of its comic relief from time at the school. The story also has an extensive romantic side-plot featuring a love triangle between Hanamichi, the girl he has a crush on, and his rival on the basketball team. If the story had been focused on a professional basketball team all these other elements would be lost and the manga would be drier and less interesting.

Although *Slam Dunk* does benefit from a healthy dose of comic relief it is hardly the only shōnen manga to take advantage of such a technique. Frequently in a manga authors will use certain characters (often the same ones) to tell jokes or to generally add humor to the story. By doing this they are able to change the pace of the story and to flesh out the manga in

general. Sometimes, there will be certain characters in a manga that serve almost no other purpose except to add humor to the story between action sequences. In *Hajime no Ippo* one of the main characters, Aoki, is constantly acting like a moron, and is usually antagonized by another main character named Takamura. Sometimes Aoki will help Takamura help to prepare for his fights in bizarre ways. In one of his fights Takamura has to fight a black man, so to help him prepare he makes Aoki wear black body paint so he is used to it. Humor like this helps the reader take a break from the dramatic pace that these stories can often take. Even in serious fighting manga like *Dragonball Z* the author will use Goku to change the pace and add some humor to the story. Goku is particularly naïve and kind of air headed and using him in this respect can serve as a way for the reader to catch their breath between climatic battles. Some shōnen manga even are entirely made up of this sort of humor.

Fujiko Fujio's very successful comedy manga *Doraemon* is pretty different from the conventional shōnen manga. The story follows the adventures of Nobita Nobi and Doraemon, a robotic cat sent back from the future by his ancestors to make sure Nobi would have a better life. Doraemon possesses a four dimensional pocket that allows him to produce a number of futuristic tool, gadgets, and toys. Interestingly, the main character Nobita Nobi is nothing like the main characters from most shōnen manga. He is weak-willed, lazy, and often relies on Doraemon to help him fix his problems, which range from academic failure to schoolyard bullies. Most of the time Doraemon's involvement only causes more harm than good. What



makes Doraemon so appealing is its innate humor. None of the characters are even close to perfect. Doraemon himself is scared of rats because a robotic rat chewed off his ears. Series like *Doraemon* are an important subgenre of shōnen manga and definitely fill a certain niche within the grander scheme of things.

Since there will always be a new generation of boys to buy shōnen comics, the genre will always be around. New stories rehashing the same old ideas and similar heroes will always come around. But the future of shōnen does not necessarily lie in the narrowest definition of boys comics. A staple of the standard successful story is a frequent peppering of jokes and romantic undertones are almost always present with an important female character. Since readership of shōnen magazines is not entirely composed of young boys, shōnen magazine editors have had to find new ways of attracting the slightly older crowd that also buys a major share of their merchandise.

To attract a different kind of audience one must create a different kind of character. As Frederick Schodt states in his book *Manga! Manga! The World of Japanese Comics*

“Nearly all comic magazines for boys and men in Japan are filled with melodramatic stories featuring macho samurai/ adventurer/ sportsmen. But since around 1977, competition has been appearing in the form of light love stories that do not fit the traditional mode; their heroes are not stern-faced sparing in speech, or even particularly earnest. It is as if a gentle mist has settled over the traditional Japanese male persona, calmed, and feminized it. The change emanates from girls comic magazines”<sup>2</sup>

Newer shōnen series such as romantic comedies like *Love Hina* are exemplify what Schodt is talking about. The hero is weaker, more effeminate, and

---

<sup>2</sup> Schodt, Page 87

many of the main characters are actually women. This newer generation of boys' comics is not necessarily the future but rather almost a new genre in and of itself. Since it seems to successfully blend both shōjo and shōnen elements its readership is potentially double what it was before.

There is no question in my mind that the traditional shōnen heroes will always be around. As long as there are young boys who clamor for an adventure story of an surprising underdog there will still be a demand. The fact that *One Piece* recently became the fastest selling manga ever to sell 100 million copies<sup>3</sup> is clear evidence that the genre is still running strong and is showing no sign of slowing down.

---

<sup>3</sup> Wikipedia

## Bibliography

Gravett, Paul. *Manga, Sixty Years of Japanese Comics*. Laurence King Publishing. New York, 2004. Pp 52-59.

Schodt, Frederick. *Manga! Manga! The World of Japanese Comics*. Kodansha International Ltd. Tokyo, 1989. Pp 14, 68-87.

Wikipedia. Search: One Piece. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/One\\_Piece](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/One_Piece)