

From Post-War Symbol to a Contemporary Guiding Light:  
The Transformation of the Image of Dazai Osamu in 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Japanese Popular  
Culture

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## Notes

1. The English titles for Dazai Osamu's works are gratefully borrowed from the following translators:

Funimation: *Bungō to arukemisuto* (*Bungo and Alchemist*)

Keene, Donald: *Ningen shikkaku* (*No Longer Human*), *Shayō* (*The Setting Sun*)

McCarthy, Ralph F.: "Hashire Merosu" ("Run, Melos!")

Yen Press: *Bungō sutoreii doggusu* (*Bungo Stray Dogs*)

Where official translations of titles are not available, I offer my own translations.

2. "Post-War Symbol" in the title is gratefully borrowed from Eto Jun's description of Dazai Osamu (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 19 June 1967).
3. Japanese names are written in order of surname followed by given name.
4. Unless otherwise stated in the bibliography, Japanese articles and sources that do not have official English translations have been translated by this researcher only for the purposes of this thesis.

## Introduction

A father names his son Osamu and has a fraught relationship with him; in a tragic turn of events, Osamu commits suicide after being bullied at school, leaving a note to his father that says, “I’m sorry for having been born.”

Nakajima Atsushi, full of terror and regret for having caused injury to his colleagues, is reprimanded by Dazai Osamu, who advises Nakajima, based on Dazai’s own experience, that one must never succumb to self-pity.

Dazai Osamu commits suicide in 1948, and in an unknown year in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, he opens his eyes while underwater and gasps for breath.

The first Osamu is from an animation short created for the 110<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Dazai Osamu’s birth, which was first screened at the Dazai Osamu Memorial Museum and later released on Youtube. The second Dazai Osamu is from *Bungō sutoreii doggusu* (*Bungo Stray Dogs*), an ongoing manga series in which all the characters are named after authors. The third Dazai Osamu is from *Ningen shikkaku: Dazai Osamu to san-nin no onna-tachi* (*No Longer Human: Dazai Osamu and Three Women*), a 2019 live-action adaptation of Dazai Osamu’s life. These characters are all Dazai Osamu and, simultaneously, none of them are Dazai Osamu. Moreover, there are countless other

Dazai Osamus scattered across light novels, manga series, anime series, games, and movies in Japan. They are all transformations of Dazai Osamu that an audience can now encounter in bookstores, cinema theatres, on television screens, and on personal electronic devices. These are the Dazai Osamus of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Adaptations and transformative works based on existing stories and people are not a new phenomenon: from *Paradise Lost*, based on the Bible, to young adult novels such as *These Violent Delights*, based on *Romeo and Juliet*, literary works provide countless opportunities for imaginative transformation. In Japan, Dazai Osamu is a popular author who has been endlessly re-imagined to suit audiences whose tastes range from horror to romance. Though he is far from the only author who has captured the popular imagination—authors such as Natsume Soseki and Tanizaki Jun'ichiro enjoy representation in popular culture as well—a question that was discussed in the academic sphere in the decades after Dazai's death remains relevant: why is Dazai Osamu, in particular, so immensely popular?

To some extent, the question can be resolved with a true but generic answer: his literature or his person (or both) must have touched people's hearts. However, as I explored further the debate on Dazai Osamu's popularity, a fascinating and complex



picture began to emerge about the relationship between the media, literature and literary figures, and audiences. It is a given that the Dazai Osamus in the transformative works are not a direct or one-to-one representation of the real person who lived; however, it is still worth asking: what are their Dazai Osamus based on? Are they based on personal interactions with him, biographies of his life, on what the media says about his life and death, or on what readers say? What are the interpretations created of Dazai Osamu by scholars, the media, and a general reading audience during his lifetime, after his death, throughout the later 20<sup>th</sup> century, and in the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Finally, what readings of Dazai Osamu have creators crafted in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and to what purpose have they crafted such readings? In other words, what does Dazai Osamu mean to creators and readers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

This thesis aims to examine the multiple interpretations of Dazai Osamu and, in so doing, offer an account of how the popular views of Dazai Osamu have evolved and shifted since his death. Secondly, through this research, I aim to explore how the literary realm, the media, and the popular culture sphere intersect and interact. It is hoped that this research will contribute to the fields of Literature and Popular Culture, as well as to their interdisciplinary study.

## Background

### 1. Who is Dazai Osamu? The Existing Academic Research

The multiple and often contradictory interpretations and views of Dazai Osamu, the varied significances and uses of his life and works, and his function in the cultural and literary landscapes of Japan are the subjects of this thesis. However, before delving into this topic, I would like to begin with a simple but important question: who is Dazai Osamu?

Biographically, the answer is straightforward. Born Tsushima Shuji in 1909 to a wealthy landowner in Aomori Prefecture, Dazai Osamu lived a short and wildly colourful life before his death in a lovers' suicide in 1948. The entirety of his life overlapped with the Taisho Era, two decades of the Showa Era, the entirety of the Second World War, and three of Japan's post-War, American Occupation years. As one might expect, such a backdrop provided rich thematic inspiration for his works, not the least of which was Japan's tumultuous relationship with modernisation and Westernisation. Dazai's personal life reflected, in microcosmic form, the landscape within which he was situated: he was exposed to French literature at university, dabbled in communism half-heartedly out of

guilt over his privileged status as the son of a landowner, concerned himself with the place of tradition, such as the Japanese kimono in an age where more and more people were embracing Western dress, and suffered air raids and the need to constantly move homes during the war. His attempts at suicide were numerous; his admiration for Akutagawa Ryunosuke is well-documented, as is the devastating effect Akutagawa's suicide had on him. He attempted individual and lovers' suicides no less than five times throughout his life and was successful in 1948 with his second mistress, Yamazaki Tomie.

However, Dazai Osamu's life and the significance of his works and person is an enduring theme in academia and among a wider audience who, generation after generation, have continued to consume and admire his works, and among his wide readership, interpretations and understandings of him are not as straightforward as the biographical facts mentioned above. I thus amend the question to this: who is Dazai Osamu *really*? More specifically, what are the various narratives and interpretations of Dazai Osamu that exist and that we should take into consideration before examining the 21<sup>st</sup>-century transformative works?

For example, one of the most enduring interpretations of Dazai Osamu is as a post-War author. Scholars have argued that against the backdrop of the national rhetoric

of progress and rebuilding the country from the ashes in the post-1945 years, “[r]eaders burdened by the wounds of a long, painful war identified with the protagonist [of *Ningen shikkaku*] who, like themselves, felt that he had failed in many ways but who also recognized the formidable challenges posed by external social forces” (Kono and Sherif, 723). Given that his works that were produced after the War, *Shayō* (*The Setting Sun*) and *Ningen shikkaku* (*No Longer Human*), are the most popular or well-read among his repertoire, interpreting him as a post-War writer who explored the very specific traumas and devastations of war is a logical choice. Kono Keisuke and Ann Sherif are not alone in categorising him as a post-War writer. Reading Oba Yozo, the protagonist of *Ningen shikkaku*, as a character who searches for the meaning of life yet is doomed by his sensitivity to become lost in the darkness of human nature, Yukihiro Hijiya posits that Dazai both illuminated the despair of post-War Japan as well as urged readers to strive for nobility in a ruined world (41). The reading of Dazai Osamu as a post-War writer is popular among the public as well, to the extent that literary critic Eto Jun argues that Dazai Osamu has—too narrowly—been immortalised as a symbol of post-War despair (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 19 June 1967).

However, scholars have also, equally, interpreted Dazai Osamu as a “universal writer” whose works are not confined to a Japanese context. Interestingly, this is not

necessarily in direct contradiction with the above categorisation of him as a post-War writer. For example, Hijiya argues that Dazai Osamu focused on and explored the implications of living in post-War Japan in *Ningen shikkaku*; however, he also states that, unlike contemporaries such as Tanizaki Junichiro and Kawabata Yasunari, whose works aimed to capture a traditional Japanese beauty, Dazai “tries to find beauty in a humanity which transcends one nation’s aesthetics and moral traditions” (34). According to both Hijiya and Shigeto Yukiko—the latter argues that Dazai’s “Sange” (Scattered Flowers) privileges the quiet, personal death as compared to, implicitly, a patriotic death for the nation—Dazai avoids directly critiquing Japanese politics despite several of his works being situated in the context of the Second World War, and thus his works can be found applicable to any number of different contexts by a wide range of readers. Critic Yoshida Kazuaki goes further and states that Dazai is “an entertainment author who wrote works according to the fashion of the day,” a statement which suggests Dazai was less concerned with ideology or politics and more interested in expressing themes and stories that readers wanted to see (*Mainichi Shimbun*, 19 June 2009). In her exploration of Dazai’s fashion statements in both his life and his works, Yasuda Anri states that “[e]xistential despair and narcissistic egoism are core elements in his oeuvre, and Dazai’s characters are often trapped between feelings of dread toward and alienation from other people, as well as an

anxiety to be loved by them” (1297). While *Ningen shikkaku* epitomises such elements, such a statement could easily apply to works like *Shayō* as well, and these are elements that can resonate with modern readers, even those far-removed from the post-War context.

In addition, there are scholars who argue that Dazai’s strength derives from his “I-novel” writing style. Part fact, part fiction, the *watakushi shōsetsu* (I-novel) demands the author’s critical and honest introspection of his or her own life. While *Ningen shikkaku* is the most famous example of an I-novel by Dazai Osamu, shorter works like “Omoide” (Memories) also draw on his life, his strained relationship with his family, and his failures. Dazai’s life can be said to have fed into the themes of his works; while James O’Brien argues that the conflation between Dazai’s life and his works is overly simplistic, when examining the comic moments in Dazai’s works, he does suggest that Dazai “enjoy[s] casting himself as a failure—evidently to please his readers” (“Comic Writer” 81). Perhaps the appeal of experiencing Dazai’s failures vicariously—despite the fact that his works are a mixture of reality and fiction and not a one-to-one representation of his life—contributes to his lasting popularity; Phyllis Lyons argues that Dazai blurs the line between author and narrator as well as narrator and reader and that “[i]t is this degree of untidy, uncontrollable participation that Dazai elicits from his readers that can explain ...

why many people continue to read about Dazai's brushes almost fifty years ago with suicide, alcoholism, drug addiction, and political radicalism" (107). Beyond there being a resonant quality in Dazai's works, where readers empathise with the failures and despair of his protagonists, it can be said that there is a guilty pleasure readers experience through reading about a life which is so messy and extreme.

Finally, and no less importantly, Dazai Osamu can be seen as a writer of the nation, as somebody who represents 'Japanese literature.' Alan Wolfe argues that Dazai's messiness and complex thoughts about death have been co-opted into the nation's narrative of progress: if suicide is a result of alienation, and alienation is a symptom of a successfully modernised state, then Dazai Osamu's writings full of despairing and alienated individuals, and especially Dazai's own suicide attempts, point to Japan having become a successfully modernised country (34-45). Thus, it is no surprise he has been co-opted into the *kokugo* (national language and literature) syllabus for schools, though it should be noted that the work that has been included—"Hashire Merosu" ("Run, Melos!")—is a much less controversial or difficult story than *Ningen shikkaku*. However, despite being included in the national political narrative as well as literary history, Dazai's place in the nation's identity is an ambiguous one: he is simultaneously recognized as a key part of modern Japanese literature and seen as a rebellious, cult-like figure, who not

only wrote in a manner directly counter to the established literary fashions of the time, but also did not make clear what his stance on governmental policies and politics was. For instance, translator Ralph McCarthy states that during the Second World War, publishers were hesitant to approach Dazai Osamu, which suggests his works could be considered critical of the government (*Self Portraits* 21).

These are the main understandings of Dazai Osamu that one can glean from a reading of scholarly material about him. However, some questions remain: what are the views and images of Dazai Osamu outside the academic realm? Are they similar or different to a significant extent, and if so, how? How do the media, such as the major newspapers, discuss him? How does the general reading public perceive him? These questions will be addressed in Chapter One, where I carry out an analysis of newspaper articles about Dazai Osamu's life, death, works, and popularity in the three major Japanese newspapers (*Asahi Shimbun*, *Mainichi Shimbun*, and *Yomiuri Shimbun*).

## 2. The Dazai Osamus of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Situating the Dazai Osamus in the Contexts of Adaptation and Popular Culture

After exploring the many interpretations of Dazai Osamu as discussed in the academic and popular realms in the first half of the thesis, the second half concerns itself



with Dazai Osamu as he has been re-imagined or transformed in popular culture. In this thesis, I explore adaptations which generally follow the original text but explore it in a different medium such as manga, anime, or games, as well as transformative works which use elements from the original text and author to tell a completely different story. By examining how Dazai and his writings are presented in these 21<sup>st</sup>-century works, I argue that these interpretations are based on the changing official and popular readings of him which, in turn, suggest that the meaning of Dazai Osamu to his readers has changed since his death. In order to explore these works, it is important to first situate Dazai Osamu within the history and context of adaptations in popular culture. What is the history of the adaptation of literary works and figures in Japan? What are the functions of such adaptive works? These need to be understood before further study can be done on the 21<sup>st</sup>-century works about Dazai Osamu.

Firstly, re-imaginings of Dazai Osamu partake in an already rich history of adaptations in Japan, in particular adaptations of literary works into films. In *From Book to Screen: Modern Japanese Literature in Film*, Keiko McDonald analyses a range of film adaptations, from Endo Shusaku's *The Sea and Poison* to Mishima Yukio's *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, and she traces the history of Japanese cinema from 1908 to 1959, arguing that the Nikkatsu Mukojima Studio "set the standard for cinema derived

from *shimpa* (melodrama)-inspired films ... [and] did so much to foster an important characteristic of Japanese cinema, namely, the deep and abiding interest in adapting the nation's literature for use on the screen" (13). Hence, the interest in adaptations is already present from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to the extent that it is considered an "important characteristic of Japanese cinema." As such, it is unsurprising that Dazai Osamu's works have received a similar enthusiastic treatment. The reason for the interest in adaptations is not necessarily a complex one: adaptation theory scholar Linda Hutcheon states that the pleasure of adaptations "comes simply from repetition with variation, from the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise" (4). Examining adaptation as both a product and a process, she argues that "adaptation is an act of appropriating or salvaging, and this is always a double process of interpreting and then creating something new" (20). Re-interpretations of Dazai Osamu's life and works are thus grounded in Japan's cinematic history and are a reflection of something more deeply ingrained in the human psyche: the human joy of recognising something familiar while being excited by the differences the new form or work presents. The success of the 2019 film *Ningen shikkaku: Dazai Osamu to san-nin no onna-tachi* is evidence of the Japanese audience's continuing interest in transformative works about Dazai's life more than seventy years after his death: the film earned more than 1.3 billion yen in box office

sales, giving it the 27<sup>th</sup> position in Japan's 2019 box office earnings, a remarkable achievement despite only being released in September 2019 (*MPAJ*). This data strongly suggests viewers are not only open to adaptations of literary works, but that they also positively enjoy them.

Secondly, there exist strong links between adaptation, popular culture, and education. As Hutcheon argues, adaptation can be used for educational purposes to entice the audience to read the source material (118). By presenting the literary work in an entertaining style, the barrier to entry for seemingly impenetrable literary works is lowered. As one of the most popular representative figures of Japanese literature, however complicated and contested his position may be, Dazai Osamu's works lend themselves to adaptation for educational purposes. For instance, *Ningen shikkaku* has been adapted into the anime series *Aoi bungaku* (Evergreen Literature), a series which aims to produce faithful adaptations of Japanese evergreen classics in anime form to make them accessible. The educational aspect of this adaptation is highlighted by the presence of a narrator at the beginning of each episode: the narrator frames the episode and explains the main themes and ideas the audience should keep in mind. In this case, it is clearly a work of both entertainment and education, to the extent that it didactically encourages the audience to accept its interpretation of the works. Similarly, while *Bungō*

*to arukemisuto (Bungo and Alchemist)* is an *otome* (lady's) game designed to draw young women to the beautiful designs, the underlying message in the game is that we should not interpret the authors' works in the "wrong" way and that the works should be read as the authors intended. *Bungō sutoreii doggusu*, notably, is credited for attracting young readers to read the source material: a high-school student who visited the *Bungō sutoreii doggusu* collaboration with the Tanizaki Jun'ichiro Memorial Museum in 2016 said she now "wants to read [Tanizaki's] novels" (*Asahi Shimbun*, 15 Oct 2016), and there were elementary school students who read the authors' works after reading the manga series. A KADOKAWA spokesperson emphasised that the series was created with the hope that readers would develop interest in the original novels, especially during a time when fewer people were reading books (*Asahi Shimbun*, 06 Oct 2016). In this sense, popular adaptations of Dazai Osamu's works (as well as those of other authors) is indicative of deliberate attempts by institutions such as publishers to re-integrate literature into people's lives.

Thirdly, and somewhat in contradiction to the above point, works of popular culture can equally represent a struggle against the official or dominant stance. Stuart Hall proposes that popular culture is not a sphere entirely separate from the dominant culture controlled by the elite, but is a culture in continual tension with the dominant

culture, which seeks to “disorganize and reorganize popular culture; to enclose and confine its definition and forms within a more inclusive range of dominant forms” (187-89). His definition and understanding of popular culture is particularly pertinent in the 2000s and 2010s, during which time the Japanese government heavily invested itself in the “Cool Japan” project, which is not only an economic and tourism policy, but also frames Japanese popular cultural products, such as animation or video games, as representative of Japanese national identity. As we shall see in Chapters Three and Four, the 2019 animation film *HUMAN LOST: Ningen shikkaku* (*HUMAN LOST: No Longer Human*), which partly had the goal of promoting Japanese literature and Japanese animation to a foreign audience, is a perfect example of how popular culture has been blended with national identity and branding. Just as Hall denies a static definition of what popular culture is, Freedman and Slade define Japanese popular culture as “a study of information flows associated with Japan rather than anything “essentially” or “authentically” Japanese.” Like Hall, who believes popular culture exists in tension with the elite culture, Freedman and Slade believe that popular culture is a “key, creative node of cultural production” that “resists control by the tastes of the elite” (4-5). Works like Ito Junji's manga adaptation of *Ningen shikkaku*, which adds a visceral horror and sexual element to the story, hardly seem appropriate for educational or national branding

purposes, and can be seen as expressing such resistance, in contrast with a nation branding project like *HUMAN LOST: Ningen shikkaku*.

This thesis wishes to take into account the above concepts and understandings of adaptations in popular culture in order to explore the meaning Dazai Osamu has for an audience in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, it must be noted that while the above section has explained the basic functions of adaptive works, the theories are primarily based on there being one “original” to refer to. As this thesis will go on to explore, one difficulty in analysing adaptations and transformative works about Dazai Osamu is the multitude of interpretations and views of him that has emerged and evolved since his death, which thus complicates the matter of the “original” the works are supposed to be based on. This thesis shall hence explore not only what the purpose and meaning of the transformative works are, but also the popular image of Dazai which they are based on, and how they serve to entrench or change this image.

### 3. The Never-Ending Dazai Osamus: Theoretical Frameworks

Finally, in order to more cohesively weave the strands of literary analysis as well as adaptation and popular culture theories together, this thesis considers two complementary theories in order to approach the multiple narratives of Dazai Osamu and

the transformative works about him: Robert Darnton's history of the book and Tanji Yoshinobu's "How Books Disappear."

In Darnton's essay "What is the History of Books?", he proposes a model for the "life cycle" of a printed book as follows:

It could be described as a communications circuit that runs from the author to the publisher (if the bookseller does not assume that role), the printer, the shipper, the bookseller, and the reader. The reader completes the circuit, because he influences the author both before and after the act of composition. ... A writer may respond in his writing to criticisms of his previous work or anticipate reactions that his text will elicit. He addresses implicit readers and hears from explicit reviewers. So the circuit runs full cycle. It transmits messages, transforming them en route, as they pass through thought to writing to printed characters and back to thought again. Book history concerns each phase of this process and the process as a whole, in all its variations over space and time and in all its relations with other systems, economic, social, political, and cultural, in the surrounding environment. (67)

By proposing this model, Darnton envisages book history as a process, inclusive of all the agents that are needed to bring the book from author to reader. Each part of the process adds to the history of the book and is an indispensable part of its life cycle; while each part of the process can be analysed independently, it derives most value from being seen in the context of the whole cycle. While some aspects of his model are not applicable to this study of Dazai Osamu—Dazai Osamu being dead as of 1948 and hence unable, for example, to take into account reader reception after his death—Darnton's model is

helpful to understand how transformative works about Dazai Osamu are not based on a vacuum or even merely based on the “original” Dazai Osamu: they are in constant interaction with the media that discusses him, the readers who read him or talk to each other about him, and the institutional agents such as the tourism industry or the Japanese government that wish to use Dazai Osamu as a part of nation branding. In Darnton’s 2007 revision of his essay, he discusses Thomas R. Adams and Nicholas Baker’s improvement to his 1982 model:

In place of the six stages in my diagram, Adams and Baker distinguish five “events”: publication, manufacture, distribution, reception, and survival. ... The last box in the Adams-Baker diagram, “survival,” represents a significant improvement over mine. I had made room for libraries, but I failed to take into consideration the reworking of texts through new editions, translations, and the changing contexts both of reading and of literature in general. (“Revisited” 504)

The stage or, using Adams and Baker’s term, event of “survival” is particularly relevant to this study, as it pertains to how transformative works based on multiple narratives of Dazai Osamu keep the “original” Dazai Osamu alive, albeit in highly changed forms and for widely varied purposes. This concern of survival has also been explored by Tanji Yoshinobu, an *Asahi Shimbun* journalist, who argues in his essay “Hon no horobikata” the following:

All forms of creative work, not just books, cannot exist without the creator.



However, there is not much a creator can do to keep the work alive after he or she has brought it into the world. The life of a work can only be sustained by the readers, the audience, and the listeners who enjoy it. In other words, the work is born by the creator, and it survives thanks to its users. A work does not survive “naturally,” it is “allowed to” survive thanks to the support of its innumerable users. (15)

Tanji’s use of the term *riyōsha* (“users”) to encapsulate readers, audience, and listeners is vital as it emphasises both the concept of “use” and the active, rather than passive, position of the recipients of a work. In conjunction with Darnton’s original and revised concept of the book and its life cycle, I would like to propose the following simplified circuitry model to guide this thesis:

Stage One: Dazai Osamu’s life and works are analysed and discussed by scholars, the media, and readers. Multiple interpretations emerge and eventually a single dominant, popular view among readers is formed (for example, most readers agree that “Dazai Osamu writes for the weak”).

Stage Two: Adaptations and transformative works about Dazai Osamu’s life and works are created based on a combination of the “original” Dazai and a specific popular interpretation of him. This is dependent on the purpose of the adaptation (for example, Ito Junji’s manga adaptation caters to middle-aged male readers, while *HUMAN LOST: Ningen shikkaku* was created to cater to a foreign audience. The Dazai Osamu(s) (and/or

Oba Yozos) in them therefore differ, with the former being a highly sexualised Dazai Osamu/Oba Yozo, and the latter being a handsome and tragic martyr).

Stage Three: Readers or the audience watch the adaptation or transformative work. They might return to the “original” Dazai Osamu text, and they might change or reinforce their view of Dazai Osamu. The popular view in turn influences how scholars, the media, and other readers discuss him (for example, readers of *Bungō sutoreii doggusu* are likely to read Dazai’s texts because of an existing interest in the manga, while the interest in the transformative work means literature museums might emphasise certain aspects of Dazai’s life or create panels that draw an association between the original Dazai and the manga Dazai).

While the full cycle, according to Darnton’s model, should begin with Dazai creating the works, as there are ample rich literary analyses of his works, I propose to study the cycle among official agents, readers, and transformative works as per the above stages.

### Research Questions and Hypothesis

Under the broad framework proposed above, these are the research questions this thesis discusses:

1. What were the media and popular interpretations of Dazai Osamu in the 20<sup>th</sup> century? Were they significantly different from the interpretations of Dazai Osamu formed by the scholarly community? If so, how?
2. What were the media and popular interpretations of Dazai Osamu in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Were they significantly different or similar to the views formed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century? If so, in what ways were they different?
3. What were the creative re-interpretations of Dazai Osamu in modern Japanese popular culture works? What interpretations were they based on? What purpose did they fulfil?
4. What are the implications of these 21<sup>st</sup>-century re-interpretations of Dazai Osamu? In other words, why are these re-interpretations significant?

This thesis proposes the following hypothesis: the dominant interpretation for almost five decades after the death of Dazai Osamu saw him as a tragic, despairing writer and was primarily influenced by the sensational treatment of his suicide in 1948 by the

media, which in turn drew readers to him and cemented the popular understanding of him as a post-War writer who empathised with the weak. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a disconnection between the scholarly understanding of him and the popular reception of him. However, by the 21<sup>st</sup> century, through concerted efforts by official forces to change Dazai Osamu's image, the popular view now is that he is not only a humorous, cheerful man, but that he is also a guiding light and his very person is a symbol of hope, creation, and rebirth. While the readings of him were more disparate in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, by the end of the 2010s, the dominant interpretation of him as a symbol of hope appears to be shared by the reading public and the official sphere alike and is reflected in the transformative works about him. Dazai Osamu, as a representative figure not only for Japan but also for a more global audience, is now seen as a positive force for progress.

### Methodology

This thesis will approach the above research questions through three methods: an analysis of newspaper reports about Dazai Osamu after his debut until the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (1933-2020), literary analysis of the creative transformative works about Dazai Osamu in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, analysis of reader reception of the

transformative works, and ethnographic research in Aomori Prefecture.

1. Analysis of newspapers: a search was carried out in the digital databases of the three major newspapers in Japan: *Asahi Shimbun*, *Mainichi Shimbun*, and *Yomiuri Shimbun*. The primary search term used was “Dazai Osamu” and, where a narrower focus was needed, “Dazai Osamu *ōtōki*” (Dazai Osamu Cherries Memorial) and “Dazai Osamu *ninki*” (Dazai Osamu popularity) were used to find the articles most relevant to this thesis’s purposes.
2. Literary analysis of creative works: a range of 21<sup>st</sup>-century works of popular culture was selected, with an attempt to represent different media and purposes of adaptation (two broad categories: educational or entertainment, with the understanding that there will necessarily be an overlap between the two). Due to the popularity of *Ningen shikkaku* above the rest of Dazai Osamu’s repertoire, and for more effective comparison, only adaptations of *Ningen shikkaku* or Dazai’s person were selected. This was the selection made: five manga adaptations of *Ningen shikkaku* (two educational, three entertainment), one anime adaptation of *Ningen shikkaku* (educational), one manga series with a Dazai character (entertainment), one game with a Dazai character (educational and entertainment),

one live-action movie with a Dazai character (entertainment), and one animation movie adaptation of *Ningen shikkaku* (educational and entertainment).

3. Reader reception analysis: a search was carried out in the newspapers' databases to understand what readers feel about the transformative works and whether the works influenced their view of Dazai Osamu, his works, or literature in general. Where newspaper articles were not available, I searched for reviews about the works online and picked examples from both positive and negative reviews to have a fuller understanding of reader reception to these works.
4. Ethnographic research: This was done primarily to support the above methodology and was carried out in Aomori Prefecture in 2021. I visited Dazai Osamu's hometown and the institutions dedicated to him to understand how he and his works were promoted as part of literary or popular culture tourism.

### Thesis Structure

Chapter One explores the interpretations that developed about Dazai Osamu during his lifetime, after his death, and until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The timeline is

divided into four broad segments: from Dazai's debut until his death (1933-1948), from his death until "Hashire Merosu" was integrated into the *kokugo* syllabus (1948-1955), from the *kokugo* integration until the peak of his popularity (1955-early 1980s), and from the mid-1980s to the late 1990s when his popularity declined but he became cemented as a classic figure in Japanese literary history. These are the main findings after analysing articles from the three major Japanese newspapers: the media sensationalising of Dazai's death did more to propel him into the public eye than scholarly and critical discussion did during his lifetime, and the dominant view among the general public was that Dazai Osamu is a tragic figure whose appeal lies in his empathy for the weak. Articles that discussed adaptations of Dazai Osamu's works were also examined: a broad range of his works were adapted into different mediums, but the adaptation that drew the most media attention were two stage adaptations of his life in the 1960s. As such, this chapter also discusses these particular stage adaptations to highlight how the audience expects adaptations to conform to their image of Dazai Osamu as dark, brooding, and charming, an interpretation that had become dominant after his death.

Chapter Two proceeds to consider the 21<sup>st</sup>-century discussions surrounding Dazai Osamu and examine the continuities and changes from the 20<sup>th</sup>-century discussions. From the end of the 1990s and in the early 2000s, institutional bodies such as the Aomori

tourism board and publishers, together with Dazai Osamu's eldest daughter, Tsushima Sonoko, sought to change Dazai's image into a more cheerful one. 2009 and 2019 also marked Dazai's 100<sup>th</sup> and 110<sup>th</sup> birthday respectively. There was thus heightened interest in and media attention on him, and the dominant interpretation that emerged from the media was of him as a guiding light that illuminated not only human weaknesses but also the importance of human connection. In addition, a particular popular culture trend emerged in the 2000s with *Axis Powers Hetalia* (2006) and this trend continued well into the 2010s: historical fantasy as well as anthropomorphic series that reimagine objects as characters. For example, *Hakuōki* (2010s) reinterprets the Shinsengumi figures as pretty boys, *Tōken ranbu* (2015) transforms historical swords into pretty boys as well, and, for a change, *Kantai Collection* (2013) transforms naval fleets into cute girls. Couched in this context, transformative re-imaginings of Dazai Osamu as a handsome manga or anime character were in line with the flavour of the time and contributed to the dominant reading of him as eccentric and playful, even while he remained charming and mysterious in the popular imagination.

Chapter Three carries out a literary analysis of the transformative works on *Ningen shikkaku* and Dazai Osamu. *Ningen shikkaku* has been adapted into wildly different genres, from science fiction to horror, and while there are adaptations that



adhere closely to the original novel, there are also adaptations that give their own unique spin to the story. In transformative re-imaginings of Dazai Osamu, he ranges from a boisterous to a mysterious figure and is always, above all, charming. From 2007 to 2021, even after accounting for stylistic differences according to the creators' preferences, there was still a change in the general style and depiction of Dazai Osamu and/or Oba Yozo, such that by the late 2010s the depictions of him were of a handsome, playful man whose tragedy ends not in despair but in rebirth and hope. The general change in art style makes him visually appealing to a majority of the audience, and the stories appear to be in line with the 21<sup>st</sup>-century dominant interpretation of Dazai Osamu as a charming, lively guiding light.

Chapter Four examines how the works discussed in Chapter Three add to or change the view of Dazai Osamu, as well as the broader significance of these transformative works. In other words, it answers the question of how Dazai Osamu's meaning has changed for a modern reader and analyses his role as a popular author that represents an intersection among media, literature, and popular culture. It does so by analysing the reader reception of the works examined in Chapter Three and, for a more comprehensive understanding of his significance, it carries out a cross-section content analysis of the works as well. This chapter offers the answer that Dazai Osamu is now a

symbol of rebirth or a symbol of how suicide can be turned into hope and, importantly, a potential representation of Japanese national identity.

## Chapter One: Dazai Osamu is Charming? Brooding? Depressed?—Readings of the

### Author in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

Before the Dazai Osamu of *Ningen shikkaku* fame, there was the newcomer and nobody Dazai Osamu. Dazai's life was eventful even before he began to write, but naturally multiple interpretations concerning him only began to emerge after his debut in the 1930s. Furthermore, even though he first published in 1933, he only came to the attention of Japanese literary circles in 1935. Thirteen years later, in 1948, while enjoying immense popularity due primarily to the works he published after the Second World War, he committed suicide with his lover, Yamazaki Tomie, and the media sensationalising of his lovers' suicide cemented his place in the cultural imagination. Dazai continued to gain popularity after his death, to an extent that surprised literary critics. The question of why Dazai had become so popular was frequently raised by these critics, and while their hypotheses varied, there is one aspect they agreed on: Dazai was popular to an extent far surpassing that of any other writer. In this respect, it is worth examining what readers said and felt about him or, more broadly, the dominant interpretation they constructed concerning him.

This chapter asks the following linked questions: what was the popular

interpretation of Dazai Osamu in the 20<sup>th</sup> century? Was it significantly different from the interpretations of him formed in the scholarly community? If so, how were they different? How did the newspaper media affect the formation of the popular view?

Broadly, the period from Dazai's debut until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century can be segmented into three parts: 1935 to 1948, the years during which Dazai actively published works and during which the public was plagued by the War and post-War concerns; 1948 to 1955, after Dazai committed suicide, through the end of the Allied Occupation, and until Dazai's "Hashire Merosu" was integrated into the *kokugo* syllabus; 1955 until the early 1980s, a period during which his popularity skyrocketed; and the 1980s to the end of the 1990s, during which time his popularity declined but he in turn became a stable, classic part of Japanese literary history. It is also notable that after his death and until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a steady stream of adaptations and transformative works based on his life and writings were released, and these will be examined briefly as well to understand the trends, viewer reactions, and the interplay they had with the dominant reader interpretation or narrative of Dazai Osamu. While this chapter also utilises scholarly discourse on Dazai Osamu, its primary goal is to understand how Dazai Osamu was popularly viewed, and thus the focus is on newspaper reports that cover the public reception of and sentiment regarding Dazai Osamu. As such,

this chapter carries out an analysis of the opinion pieces, reports, and advertisements about Dazai Osamu published in the three major Japanese newspapers: *Asahi Shimbun*, *Mainichi Shimbun*, and *Yomiuri Shimbun*.

This chapter argues that, among the general reading public, Dazai Osamu was primarily read as a tragic, charming writer, whose appeal lay in his personability and his empathy for human weaknesses. His appeal was particularly strong among young readers, who, after the War, were disillusioned by the governmental narrative of rebuilding Japan from the ashes into a strong, modern nation, and who thus enjoyed Dazai's rebellious nature. It is notable that the public understanding of Dazai Osamu did not necessarily take into account his full oeuvre nor the complexity in his works: instead, there was an exceptional focus on *Ningen shikkaku*, his last published work before his suicide and commonly considered his representative work. Finally, Dazai Osamu's popularity was driven by the media's sensationalising of his suicide, which suggests his popularity and the dominant reader perception of him was at least partially built on his death rather than on the content of his works.

1935 to 1948: An Emblem of Modern Anxieties

When Dazai Osamu first published his works, he was reviewed and read primarily by literary critics, and he was included in critiques of a new generation of writers. In other words, before Dazai Osamu became an independent phenomenon, he was reviewed as merely one example, out of several writers, of the concerns of a new generation. For instance, Kobayashi Hideo wrote in a 1935 article of the difficulty of depicting modern times, and Dazai Osamu's *Gyakkō* (Against the Currents) was included as an example of this difficulty due to how it captured the twisted inner worlds of the modern intelligentsia (*Asahi Shimbun*, 29 Jan 1935). Similarly, in the same year, Nakamura Murao stated that, compared to established writers who wrote based on personal experiences, new writers had a tendency to write about other "lives" and "incidents" and "personalities." He included Dazai Osamu in this category of new writers and criticised *Gyakkō* as having careful thought put into it but ultimately presenting a narrow worldview (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 06 Feb 1935). The focus on *Gyakkō* is understandable due to the limited number of works Dazai could have reasonably published as a new writer, and there was general recognition that Dazai was a new writer with potential but whose views were immature. As of 1935, his most notable trait was his association with Akutagawa Ryunosuke—when he went missing, the *Yomiuri Shimbun* article specifically noted the possibility that he might have committed suicide due to his

admiration for Akutagawa (17 Mar 1935), and in October 1935 *Gyakkō* was acknowledged as a contender for the Akutagawa Prize, which strengthened the perception that Dazai and Akutagawa were connected (*Asahi Shimbun*, 09 Oct 1935).

However, there was a common thread running through these early critiques of Dazai Osamu's works: his expression of modern anxieties, particularly that of the jaded individual navigating a changing society. For example, like Nakamura Muraō, Sugiyama Heisuke criticised Dazai Osamu for his naïve views and stated that before he expresses anger at being misunderstood by the world, he should make an effort to understand the world (*Asahi Shimbun*, 01 Dec 1935). Less critically, Abe Tomoji spoke of Dazai Osamu as part of a group of new writers whose writings portrayed a deep anxiety, and he surmised it might be due to their loss of faith in "humanity" (*Asahi Shimbun*, 03 Oct 1936). It was only in 1940 that Dazai Osamu began to be critiqued independently or as the prime example among the new generation of writers, and the focus was still on the expression of modern anxieties, such as when Nagaoki Yoshiro used Dazai Osamu as an example of how a new generation of writers had lost faith in their modern times (*Asahi Shimbun*, 30 May 1940). In response, Dazai wrote that the new generation of writers was "simply affirming and acknowledging the times as they are," that they were all "servile" and "doing cowardly labour," and that they were not critiquing this anxiety but viewing it

affirmatively (*Asahi Shimbun*, 02 June 1940). Thus, from 1935 to 1940, the main discussion was primarily within the literary and scholarly realm, and there was no notable reader feedback in the newspapers. From these discussions, the image of Dazai Osamu was that of a writer who had his finger on the pulse of a modern individual's concerns. Furthermore, the discussion between Dazai Osamu and his critics created the impression that Dazai Osamu was a spokesperson for a generation born into a time that afforded them no security.

In Seiji Lippit's examination of writers who exemplified modernist concerns in the 1920s to 1930s, he provides an overview of the cultural shifts and historical events that shaped those writings:

Two specific transformations in cultural production can be cited as contexts for the shifting conceptions of literature manifested here. The first is the explosion of different forms of mass culture in the late 1910s through the 1920s. This period witnessed an acceleration of urbanization and the consolidation of a mass, consumer capitalism based on the spread of new technical media and the commodification of all levels of culture. ... It also decisively shifted the conception of the literary text into the realm of commodity, a consciousness manifested in a number of works from this time. ... Second, the 1920s witnessed the rapid and extensive politicization of literary practice, most prominently in the emergence of a vigorous Marxist literary movement that reached the peak of its influence in the early Showa period. ... Together, these two cultural phenomena of the 1920s...undermined any conception of a pure or autonomous literature, one that would be independent of the marketplace or politics. (17-18)



When Dazai Osamu began writing and publishing, he was situated in a cultural and social field wherein new media and the mass market had to be navigated, and where the conception of literature itself had changed. Undoubtedly, the development of the mass market and mass consumerism had an unprecedented effect on writers who had now to grapple with meeting the tastes of the market. In addition and more broadly, due to the 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake, the country experienced an immense and traumatic loss of human life and needed to go through rebuilding. This resulted in a transformed, Westernised urban landscape (22-23). Furthermore, “[t]he 1930s were a turbulent decade in Japanese history. The nation experienced a deep economic downturn, the military established almost complete control over the government, and imperial ambitions intensified, pushing the country to expand its borders in East Asia” (Di Marco 57). There was therefore an ongoing struggle to reconcile the expanding conception of the nation with what was commonly viewed as Western intrusions into not only the landscape but the lifestyle of the people. As such, if Dazai Osamu and the generation of new writers he was included in had “lost faith in their modern times,” as Nagaoki critiqued, one can reasonably conclude that the aforementioned cultural shifts and historical ruptures Dazai Osamu had witnessed might have been a decisive factor that shaped his writings and made him relatable to a public that similarly experienced such changes.

Interestingly, there is a gap from 1941 to 1948 during which there were no reviews of Dazai's works in the *Asahi Shimbun*, a gap that is worth considering especially because his most well-received works, *Shayō* and *Ningen shikkaku*, were published after the War. "During the years of the Pacific War, the censors kept a wary eye on Dazai and publishers became more reluctant to ask him for manuscripts," which suggests his works were or could have been read as critical of Japanese imperialism and nationalism (McCarthy, *Self Portraits* 21). After the War, the wariness regarding his works continued due to the Allied Occupation of 1945 to 1952. Margaret Hillenbrand argues that "writers and intellectuals in Japan and Taiwan have responded with visceral fear and anger to the diminished sense of sovereignty that is the quid pro quo for American protection" but that many of these works surfaced only from the late 1950s due to censorship (106). In addition, in a 1959 text published by the United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Ronald Anderson terms the period from 1945 onwards as the "Democratization Epoch" of Japan's education system, a time in which militarism and ultra-nationalism were removed and "democratic educational concepts and practices aimed at developing an educated, peaceful, and responsible citizenry" were introduced (20). In contrast, Dazai Osamu can be read as a post-War writer who delivered sharp protests against the official narrative of liberation and progress. As Kono and Sherif argue, readers of *Ningen*

*shikkaku* identified with the protagonist who not only faced personal failures but was also disadvantaged by the society around him (723). Dazai's anti-establishment but simultaneously apolitical writings were also arguably in tune with public sentiment: Alan Wolfe states that "the sense of increasing deep cynicism and wry despair that young readers shared with Dazai points to a tendency to see the vision of liberation and democracy as a bubble about to burst" (175). If the above arguments hold true, then it is unsurprising that there was little or no discussion of Dazai's works in the newspapers either during or immediately after the War.

That said, during that same period of time, there were multiple advertisements for Dazai's works in the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, which suggests he was regularly in the readers' minds and was, at the very least, enjoying respectable sales. Furthermore, he was "the one Japanese author who consistently turned out entertaining and worthwhile literature during the late thirties and early forties, when the entire nation was toeing the ideological line of militarism and fanatic patriotism," which explains both the advertisement and sales of his works as well as the lack of political or critical discussion about him (McCarthy, *Self Portraits* 9). Although Dazai enjoyed increasing popularity with the works he produced after the War, it was only in 1948, with his lovers' suicide, that newspaper articles about Dazai increased exponentially, he became a subject of intense

public interest, and a popular interpretation and view of him different from the scholarly realm began to emerge.

### 1948 to 1955: From Sensation to Integration

Dazai Osamu committed suicide with Yamazaki Tomie on 13 June 1948, and their bodies were found on 19 June 1948, which would have been his thirty-ninth birthday. With this suicide, Dazai cemented his eternal place in the cultural imagination. As Takiguchi Akihiro, associate professor of Japanese literature at Daito Bunka University, argues,

[t]he first major reason [that made Dazai Osamu popular] was the wave of extremely heightened interest after his death. The scandalous incident of him committing lovers' suicide with a War widow, coupled with the difficulty in finding the bodies, gave the media a perfect topic to capitalise on. Dazai's name became known widely even among those unfamiliar with "literature." (7)

As we shall see in this section, Dazai's life and death, perhaps more than his literature itself, piqued the nation's interest, and the media must be discussed because of the vital role it played in contributing to Dazai's popularity as well as the shaping of his image.

There was extensive coverage of Dazai's death, as well as the implications of his

suicide, in all three major newspapers. In the 15 June 1948 *Asahi Shimbun*, there was a report that Dazai's wife, Tsushima Michiko, had requested police help in searching for Dazai, who had left a note to her stating that "[he] can no longer write, [he] want[s] to go somewhere nobody can find [him]." The report was accompanied by a description of how there were photos of Dazai and Yamazaki Tomie as well as joss sticks burning in Tomie's room. The sensational nature of these reports continued: on 16 June 1948, a large section of the two-page *Asahi Shimbun* morning paper was devoted to Dazai's life, his suspected lovers' suicide with Tomie, Tomie's background, and photos of her room as well as the location from which they were suspected to have entered the river, with the report ending with an unravelling of the relationship between Dazai and the Yamazaki family. The *Yomiuri Shimbun* morning paper on the sixteenth used the same photographs, and the report summary described Dazai as a unique and popular writer and stated that "this case of suicide has caused the largest ripple since Akutagawa Ryunosuke's suicide," neatly connecting Dazai with the writer he admired and drawing more reader attention due to the association of two well-known writers with equally significant suicides. The disagreement over his motive for suicide added another dimension to the sensationalizing of his suicide: Ibuse Masuji and Kamei Katsuichiro, both of whom were close friends of Dazai, argued that he would not have committed suicide simply because he had slammed

into a wall in his writing, while Tsushima Michiko asserted she felt he truly wanted to commit suicide this time. The article concluded with a comment on Dazai's popularity after the War and, simultaneously, his relationships with several women. The *Mainichi Shimbun* report on the same day focused on the "unsettling topics" to do with death and suicide in Dazai's post-War works, suggesting a strong connection between his works and his personal mental state.

The articles ranged from factual reports of his disappearance to speculation about the reason for his suicide, as well as details of Dazai's and Tomie's lives to feed the curiosity of readers, and the above overview of the articles from immediately after his disappearance suggests that Dazai Osamu was either popular enough among the public for his death to garner media attention or, as argued by Takiguchi, the media picked up on the scandalous nature of his life and death, sold his story to a public hungry for spectacle, and thereby made him popular. The media sensationalising of his suicide continued until his body was found and the funeral carried out. On the seventeenth, an *Asahi Shimbun* report discussed the popularity of the Tamagawa River as a suicide spot, with Dazai being the sixteenth person to commit suicide there in that year, and on the eighteenth, with Dazai's death being a foregone conclusion, the *Yomiuri Shimbun* published a discussion between critics Honda Akira and Aono Suekichi on the meaning we can draw from the

deaths of writers such as Arishima Takeo, Dazai Osamu, and Akutagawa Ryunosuke. In particular, they emphasised Dazai's position as a rebel against both the literary *bundan* (an elite circle comprising writers, critics, and publishers) and the direction Japan was headed in after the War. On the twentieth, after his body had been found, the *Yomiuri Shimbun* report focused on the sensational nature of his death, describing in detail how Dazai's and Tomie's hands were bound together, as well as how Dazai's body was taken care of while Tomie's lay forgotten.

From the above articles published in the time around Dazai's death, it can be concluded that there was intense focus on his disappearance, works, and personal life, suggesting he had become a person of interest to the general public rather than only the literary circles. While some articles touched on his works, they either focused on the connection between the themes he wrote about and his suicide or used them to show how Dazai became a popular writer after the War. Of particular interest to this thesis is how sensationalised Dazai's death and life were, and how the media reports cemented him even further in the general reader and audience's mind as a writer who led a colourful life and died a colourful death. Dazai's works might have made him an interesting, charismatic writer in his lifetime, but it is arguably his suicide and the media's role in sensationalising it that made him a star figure and created his unique aura. In David

Karashima's study of the people who were crucial in making Murakami Haruki an internationally renowned author, he states the following:

Murakami makes appearances only rarely, and almost never in Japan. Most of the available images of the author are by photographers whose names also carry and impart high levels of prestige—like Avedon, Marion Ettliger, and Nobuyoshi Araki. This, along with *The New Yorker's* reputation and influence—its reported circulation was around 600,000 in 1991 and would surpass one million in 2004—meant that Murakami's fame now extended far beyond the normal reaches of literary culture. (198)

In other words, Murakami made a name for himself not only through his works but also through the aura of mystery and prestige surrounding him, evidenced by his photo being taken only by celebrated photographers and the prestige and mass circulation of the magazine the photos were published in. The creation of a literary star thus requires a more careful look at the creation of the persona or aura and the effect of the media, perhaps beyond even that of the star creator's texts. In Dazai's case, it is arguably his suicide and the media reporting of it which created his aura—that of a romantic, tragic figure—and this aura guided the public's popular narrative of him. The sales numbers speak for his popularity: after Dazai's death, the *Yomiuri Shimbun* published twenty advertisements from July to November 1948 for his works, which suggests that there was an increased public desire to consume his works as well as a desire on the part of publishers to ride the



wave of interest in Dazai. This in turn pushed Dazai ever more to the forefront of the public's attention and created more demand for his texts, resulting in a mutually beneficial feedback loop between publishers and readers.

After the Allied Occupation, from 1953, there continued to be interest in Dazai Osamu in the major papers. For instance, the *Asahi Shimbun* published, on 01 February 1953, a summary of *Shayō*, with a description of Kazuko as “a modern woman,” though it does not explicate how she is a modern woman and leaves readers to infer this from the summary of the text. On 16 October 1953, there was a note in the “culture digest” portion of the *Asahi Shimbun* that stated that a monument to Dazai Osamu would be erected. The building of a monument in memory of him, specifically a literary monument, further established him in the popular imagination as an important writer in Japan's literary history. However, it was in 1955 that Dazai's place in Japanese literary history as well as the public sphere decisively changed: firstly, Chikuma Shobo published a *zenshū* (collected edition) of Dazai Osamu's works, symbolically indicating that he was important enough to warrant his works to be published in a collector's edition format. Secondly, “Hashire Merosu” was included in *kokugo* textbooks, which signalled his importance beyond the realm of the general reading public.

Since its inclusion in the list of texts for *kokugo* education, Dazai's "Hashire Merosu" has been consistently used as a key text in middle school education (Miura 123), and in 1957 it was even considered as a teaching material for moral education (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 13 Nov 1957). According to Hasegawa Izumi, a specialist in modern Japanese literature, it was included in the *kokugo* texts due not only to its clarity of thematic concerns but also because of how "the depiction of faith and friendship resonates with youth, even while it includes discussions of important and relevant questions" (qtd in *Kenkyū jiten* 231). The change from reading Dazai Osamu as an anti-establishment author to reading him as an example of moral education is striking and suggests he had been integrated by the Japanese government into its nation-building efforts. Including him in *kokugo* education signals that his work captures the essence of the Japanese identity or the nation-state: in its earliest iteration in 1894, *kokugo* was seen as the essence of the Japanese people, and this narrative persisted especially into the post-War period (Tai 10-13). Lee Yeounsuk further notes that

the ideology of *kokugo* is a product of the ethos of Japan during the third decade of Meiji ... we can say that the third decade was a time of unification of the nation-people (*kokumin*) by both government and the public and a time of an upsurge of consciousness of the nation-state (*kokka*).  
(64)

As such, including Dazai Osamu indicates that to the Japanese government, his

works—or “Hashire Merosu” in particular—contribute to the building and strengthening of Japanese nationhood. It is a clever move for a government that wished to distance itself from its imperialist ambitions throughout the Taisho and early Showa period: by incorporating Dazai, whose works seemed to critique the establishment, the move symbolised the government’s embracing of liberal values and their concern for the individual who has been embittered by War. In addition, by co-opting Dazai into the national narrative, Japan strengthened its case for having been successfully modernised:

The story of modern writing in Japan is associated of course with that familiar syndrome of alienation, which yields its own form of suicide, labeled “egoistic” and “anomic” by Durkheim. Ultimately it is this type of suicide, referred to neutrally as *jisatsu* (self-destruction, murder of the self) and associated intimately with several Japanese writers, that is seen as an indicator of modernization by testifying to the presence of disaffected, alienated artists. (Wolfe 34-35)

Suicide as a symptom of alienation—and thus that of modernization—is an indicator of a modernized state, albeit a troubling indicator. Simultaneously, suicide is also an entrenched aspect of the narrative of Japanese identity:

For centuries, Japanese legend, literature, and drama had portrayed suicide in a positive and romantic light, and enshrouded it in a passionate and glamorous aura. Suicide was described as an act of dedication and commitment, related to a deep sense of responsibility or profound love, and thus deserving of social appreciation. In other words, voluntary death was not condemned as an act of escapism or cowardliness; it was rather glorified according to a peculiar aesthetic of death. (Di Marco 28-29)

In other words, suicide was not only a symptom of modernity, it was also a continuation of long-held cultural beliefs about suicide and the romance of it. Writers like Akutagawa Ryunosuke and Dazai Osamu thus neatly encapsulate both the narrative of an advancing, modernised state as well as a “Japanese” essence in their lives, which ultimately might be their greater function as part of the *kokugo* syllabus than their works in themselves (Lee On Yee, “Dazai Osamu’s Place”). “Dazai protested the oppression of modernity and the defeat by embracing dissipation, and in the end he turned to suicide defined by decadence and excess,” writes Ann Sherif (114-15), but while Dazai’s protest was against modernity, it was paradoxically this protest that highlighted Japan’s advancement, its distance from its wartime Imperialist ambitions, and its embracing of its new modernised identity.

### 1955 to the 1980s: An Unstoppable Momentum

By 1957, Dazai Osamu was incorporated into and considered a key part of Japanese literary canon. “*Ōtō*” (Cherries) was included in a collection of “Japanese Short Stories” recommended to a Soviet Union magazine editor, the collection title suggesting that all the stories included were key representations of Japanese fiction (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 02 Dec 1957). In 1964, the publisher Chuo Koron published Dazai Osamu’s

stories as the third part of its *Nihon no bungaku* (The Literature of Japan) series, with Tanizaki's works being the first part and Kawabata's works being the second part of the series (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 15 Apr 1964). Furthermore, the editors of this series included Tanizaki, Kawabata, Mishima, and Donald Keene; with recognized literary writers and translators on the editing team, the suggestion is strong that any writer who is included in this series is recognized as an important figure in Japanese literature. The Dazai Osamu Prize was also established by Chikuma Shobo in 1964 to recognise and reward new writers; the establishment of a prize in his name further signal his vital place in Japan's construction of a national literary canon. Edward Mack argues that even if receipt of the Akutagawa Prize does not guarantee central status in the Japanese literary canon, "by reminding the public every six months that such a field still exists and that the field warrants both attention and celebration, the Akutagawa Prize perpetuates the conception of modern Japanese literature itself" (3239). Arguably, the Dazai Osamu Prize, while not as influential as the Akutagawa Prize, functions in a similar way: by reminding the public of its existence on an annual basis, it elevates Dazai's importance in the official Japanese literary canon. There was also widespread scholarly interest in him: in 1978, the *Kyōiku shuppan senta* (Educational Publication Centre) released three volumes of essays, discussions, and critiques of Dazai Osamu, and the advertisement of these texts in the

papers suggests that there was a market interest in these scholarly critiques of Dazai Osamu (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 09 Jan 1978).

It can thus be speculated that Dazai Osamu's readership only continued to grow from the 1950s, with additional visibility due to the increased publications of his works and a more elevated position in the eyes of the reading public. On 09 June 1958, nearly a full decade after Dazai's death, critic Okuno Tateo published a long article in the *Asahi Shimbun* and wrote as follows:

When he committed suicide in a sensationalized way, during the post-War time when he enjoyed incredible popularity, there were many who lamented his passing and dedicated words of love to him, but he still was not recognized in the literary sphere after his death. ... Yet, ten years after his death, Dazai Osamu's works are still read and loved by many. With every year that passed, there are noticeably more young men and women who attend the *ōtōki* memorial. Every year, Dazai Osamu takes the lion's share as the topic of graduation theses. ... Why is he so widely read and popular even now? For one, compared to other writers, he is modern. (09 June 1958)

Okuno proceeds to explain that his "modernity," while important, was insufficient to explain such sustained popularity and concludes that readers strongly resonated with his works because "he put his all into his works" and that such "passion and sincerity is contagious." While less effusive, Kamei Katsuichiro notes too that more and more young people were attending Dazai's memorial every year and the reason his works were so

popular was because they contain all the topics such as family, religion, revolution, and change that would appeal to young readers. “He does not solve all those problems, nor does he depict them perfectly. However, the traces left behind from a sincere, no-holds-barred attempt to face these issues, must have attracted these young readers. In addition, there is humour in his works” which, presumably, is a factor that makes him entertaining to read (*Asahi Shimbun*, 14 June 1959).

The drive to explain his popularity is not unexpected, considering the increasing number of attendees at the annual *ōtōki* memorial event. By 1965, there were six hundred university students at the event (*Asahi Shimbun*, 20 June 1965) and in 1967, the temple Zenrinji, where Dazai Osamu’s grave is situated, began distributing queue tickets to control the crowd (*Asahi Shimbun*, 18 June 1967). It was also in 1967 that there was the first organised walking tour that brought Dazai fans to places associated with him in Mitaka (*Asahi Shimbun*, 03 June 1967). In September of the same year, five hundred fans (ninety percent of whom were female) attended the reading salon organised by *Yomiuri Shimbun*, as the discussion in that session was about Dazai Osamu (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 11 Sep 1967). In 1980, a survey among 270 college students found that both young men and women ranked Dazai Osamu as their favourite author (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 26 Oct 1980). By 1982, there were nearly a thousand fans attending his memorial (*Asahi Shimbun*, 20

June 1982), and his works have been referred to as “The Eternal Literature for Youth” (*Asahi Shimbun*, 17 June 1984).

It is thus that from the mid-1950s to the early-1980s, when attendance at the memorial reached its peak, the discussion around Dazai focused on the reason for his popularity, with critics eager to explain how and why Dazai is popular to an extent that had not been seen for other writers. More voices from the general reading public were also included in the newspaper reports as journalists interviewed memorial attendees to understand their reasons for reading and liking Dazai Osamu. Through the difference between the public’s reasons and the literary circle’s critique of Dazai, we can observe a split in the reading of him. For instance, an evaluation of the Decadent writers such as Oda Sakunosuke, Dazai Osamu, and Sakaguchi Ango, in the 25 January 1969 *Asahi Shimbun*, suggests that fans were drawn to these authors’ works due to the discrepancy between the incredible economic miracle and the suffocation people feel, and writer Katsura Hidesumi speculated that there was a “spiritual hunger” among the youth and that they find this hunger sated when reading Dazai Osamu’s works (*Asahi Shimbun*, 20 June 1978). On the other end of the spectrum, Eto Jun argues that Dazai’s popularity was built on the immortalisation of him as a symbol of post-War despair, when his works simply and merely coincided with the post-War period (*Asahi Shimbun*, 19 June 1967). There



were also those similarly critical of his popularity, such as Noda Utaro, who suggests that the young attendees of Dazai Osamu's memorials did not even know the date on which Dazai Osamu actually died (*Asahi Shimbun*, 18 June 1963).

However, in reports that included what attendees of his memorial said, young men and women often spoke of how they felt a resonance with the "human weakness" portrayed in Dazai's works or, interestingly, that they wanted to experience for themselves at least once what the memorial is like, suggesting the popularity of Dazai Osamu himself was what made visitors curious (*Asahi Shimbun*, 20 June 1975). A 1967 *Mainichi Shimbun* article describes how Dazai was "brother," "lover," and "god" to the younger generation, with a considerable number of university students writing graduation theses on him as a "memento of youth." An interviewee stated, "I like Dazai's romanticism ... Mishima wrote out of admiration for the strong, but Dazai wrote out of empathy for the weak, so I like [Dazai's] works" (*Mainichi Shimbun*, 10 June 1967). There were those who saw Dazai as an encouragement to continue living through difficult times, such as a fourth-year university student who stated, "When I'm in pain, when other people have hurt me, Dazai's face comes to mind" (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 20 June 1970). This student is not alone: in 1971, a first-year university student stated, "After I failed the high school examinations the first time, I read Dazai's works and felt my heart soothed. There

is gentleness in it” (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 20 June 1971). The statement of the fan suggests that Dazai’s works resonated with him or her precisely because Dazai is sympathetic towards “failures” of all types. In 1974, six hundred fans gathered for his memorial, one of whom stated, “When I do not know why I should live, Dazai comes to mind” (*Mainichi Shimbun*, 24 June 1974). According to attendees for the 1980 memorial, Dazai Osamu is simultaneously “a doctor for [one’s] heart” and “someone who is always lectured by old men,” the latter comment suggesting that his rebellious spirit resonated with young people (*Asahi Shimbun*, 21 June 1980). Hyodo Masanosuke, a professor of Japanese literature, notes this of his students:

Sometimes I asked my students: why do you like Dazai’s novels so much? Over thirty years [since 1950], there was no significant difference in the answers I received: [they responded with] *Ningen shikkaku*. It is the first novel they speak of. According to them, they like his works because “it feels as though Dazai is speaking on [their] behalf” and “there is human weakness in them.” Female students make up the vast majority of those who enjoy his works. They even said, for instance, “If he is somebody [they] know, [they] would have the impulse to embrace him.”  
(132)

He continues to argue that his students’ understanding is based on a single novel instead of Dazai’s wider repertoire of works, which agrees with Noda’s belief that young fans have a limited understanding of Dazai and his works. Of note, the fact that there was no significant difference over the thirty years he asked students the same question suggests

*Ningen shikkaku* is the novel, above all others, that has lived and will continue to live in the cultural imagination. This is in spite of the actual complexity and range of Dazai's works and his writings. For example, while there is a tendency to conflate Dazai Osamu with his characters in his works, due to how widely he is considered as a *shishōsetsu-ka* (I-novelist), James O'Brien argues that such conflation is simplistic:

Even when he does write factually about his life, Dazai exercises a high degree of selectivity. ... Dazai often uses his persona in a coy manner, showing certain facets of the psyche while concealing others in a kind of hide-and-seek exercise. ... In reading Dazai we acquaint ourselves with the attitudes and the speech, the gestures and the physical appearance of a figure the author invites us to identify with himself. (*Selected Stories* 5-6)

Hence, O'Brien argues that Dazai Osamu is deliberate in shaping his personas such that readers identify him in them, even if the works in themselves are not wholly autobiographical. Hyodo Masanosuke is similarly critical of Okuno Takeo's analysis that *Ningen shikkaku* was a work of self-reflection as Dazai keenly felt his death approaching. Against this analysis, he argues that the diaries of Yamazaki Tomie portrayed a Dazai Osamu who was not as sickly as he presented himself to be and who did not seem to particularly suffer from remorse or pain as he wrote *Ningen shikkaku*. In other words, "Dazai Osamu was an author through and through" whose experiences are not equivalent to those of Oba Yozo's (Hyodo 141). Some argue that at most, *Ningen shikkaku* can be

read as a parody of Dazai Osamu's life.

Dazai Osamu was a master at parody ... even his I-novel can be said to be a parody of the real events in his life. ... Dazai carefully avoided presenting himself as he is in his novels, but even so, readers have created in their minds what we can call an image of Dazai. (Ko'ori 251)

From the above, through the scholars' use of terms like "persona" and "image of Dazai," we can therefore see that there is considerable agreement among scholars and critics that Dazai Osamu should not be read and interpreted as a direct reflection of his characters, nor should his characters be read as a direct reflection of him.

A second agreement among critics that is not as widely shared among the general reading public is that Dazai Osamu's entire repertoire should be taken into account when assessing his literary talent. While the general reading public—arguably both in Japan and in other countries—has a hyper-focus on post-War texts like *Ningen shikkaku*, as seen in the above summary of *ōtōki* memorial attendees' reflection, in the collection *Crackling Mountain and Other Stories*, published in 1989, the blurb states as follows:

Dazai's reputation in the West has been based for the most part upon translations of his postwar novels, notably *The Setting Sun* (1947), and *No Longer Human* (1948). These, coupled with the author's short life of periodic dissipation, have led to a narrowly focused assessment of Dazai's tremendous literary achievement as dark and densely autobiographical. The true depth and range of Dazai's talent, however, can be gleaned only through a broader sampling of his

works—particularly through the short stories that have earned him a reputation among Japanese readers as a master teller of tales. (O'Brien)

As we can tell from the above summary, Dazai's reputation has been formed primarily from his post-War works and a closer reading of his entire oeuvre affords us a better understanding of his character and his writing. This opinion is not isolated: Ralph McCarthy states, in his introduction to a collection of romantic fantasies by Dazai,

Dazai Osamu (1909-1948) was, above all else, a master storyteller. Though perhaps best known for his autobiographical fiction, he in fact experimented with a tremendous range of narrative techniques and prose styles, and his overriding concern was always with telling a good story—creating a work of art that could both entertain and move his readers. Interestingly enough, this concern was itself a major and recurring theme in Dazai's work. A close look at even his most blatantly autobiographical stories will reveal that many of them are actually as much about the art of fiction as they are about the artist, in that they tend to fold in upon themselves, to blur the line between reality and the “continuous dream” of fiction. (*Blue Bamboo* 9)

To critics and literary analysts, Dazai Osamu presents a much more complex picture when all his works are taken into account and when the mix between the real (the personal) and the fictional (the persona) is closely examined. However, to the general reading public—more particularly, the young people—Dazai Osamu is read more simply and directly as romantic, empathetic, rebellious, and a guide for them on how to live, based primarily on their reading of solely *Ningen shikkaku* and of Oba Yozo as a one-to-one stand-in for Dazai Osamu. Critic Takahashi Hideo therefore concludes that

Dazai's "human frailness and sensitivity" resonated with young people in modern times, "and thus they feel Dazai has somehow magnified them and peered into their hearts" (*Asahi Shimbun*, 26 May 1988). The sense of closeness between them and Dazai appears to be what draws young people to him, and they do not necessarily read Dazai with the consciousness of the specific historical context his works were produced in nor the context of the times they are reading his works in. As several reports have noted, his works are "The Eternal Literature for Youth," suggesting there is a timeless quality to his works that young people enjoy.

However, the darker side of Dazai's popularity and the hyper-focus on his most despairing text show in reports of Dazai fans committing suicide like he did. The most prominent suicide was that of Tanaka Hidemitsu, a writer who called himself Dazai's disciple and who committed suicide in front of Dazai's grave (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 04 Nov 1949). There were also reports of reader fans following in Dazai's footsteps, such as a Waseda University student who committed suicide on 23 October 1963 and left a message stating, "I will die in the Tamagawa River that Dazai Osamu had died in" (*Mainichi Shimbun*, 24 Oct 1963). Even for cases that have no direct link to Dazai Osamu, such as the disappearance of songwriter Inui Haruo, his schoolmate shared that "[she] thinks it might be suicide because of his recent actions and how he has read all of Dazai

Osamu's works," which suggests Inui might have been influenced by Dazai's writings and thus chose suicide the way Dazai had (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 06 Jan 1950). A police officer shared that in the two years after his death, there were at least a hundred people who committed suicide in the Tamagawa River and that "[Dazai] must have been an incredible person to have such influence" (*Asahi Shimbun*, 17 June 1965). In a 1986 article, Koga Makihiko included the beautifying of Dazai Osamu's death as a criticism of the glorification of suicide in Japan's history and in fiction (*Asahi Shimbun*, 02 June 1986). Dazai Osamu more than any other writer is seen to bear heavy responsibility for influencing these readers to commit suicide:

[Japanese novelists] described voluntary death as a way out of a corrupt, degenerate, and immoral society, an individual decision not to bear such degradation. ... Dazai [through *Ningen shikkaku*] interpreted suicide as an act of freedom, where freedom is seen as self-ownership over one's own life and body. The right to end one's own life was thus advocated as the most basic right of all. (Di Marco 103-04)

The fact that Dazai is included in a discussion of suicide in 1986 suggests the messages and values he conveyed through his suicide—freedom of choice, an escape from an unbearable society—remained attractive to young readers throughout the changing societal and economic contexts. That said, the specific context of the 1950s to 1980s, when Japan's suicide rates intertwined with the economic boom, should be considered as

well. In 1960, Prime Minister Ikeda Hayato announced an income doubling plan which “symbolizes the commitment of the government to growth at all costs” (Kingston, *Transformation* 38). As can be imagined, the economic benefits were high, as were the social costs. Suicide numbers had already hit a record high of 23,500 cases in 1958 even before the income doubling plan, but there was a surprising lack of attention paid to the problem by the authorities, who only opened an official hotline to discourage suicidal people in 1971 (Prasol 293). Simultaneously, in the 1970s there was a “fervent fascination with national character” in the wake of the economic miracle (Di Marco 147). To summarise it,

the 1950s paved the way to the restoration of a romantic and glorifying discourse on suicide as a peculiar feature of the Japanese ... from the late 1960s on, when a new wave of cultural nationalism along with the *nihonjinron* debate engulfed Japan ... the Japanese once again became fascinated with the idea of suicide as part of the national character. (8)

The narrative of suicide occupied a prominent place in Japan’s history and culture, such as—but not restricted to—the narrative of suicide as a noble act, particularly during wartime. Therefore, “it is arguable that the Japanese government saw suicide not as an impediment to progress but as a natural and even necessary part of national identity, and thus there would not have been a strong incentive to address this problem” (Lee On Yee, “Dazai Osamu’s Place”). As such, there is a complex interplay among Dazai’s suicide, his



fans' admiration for him, and suicide as a phenomenon in post-War Japanese society. As seen in the articles examined in the above section, while fans stated that he is a guide for them on how to live, there were also those who committed suicide in emulation of him, even going so far as to drown in the same river he had drowned in. There are parallels between the fans' suicides and Dazai's attempted suicides in the wake of Akutagawa's death, suggesting that the narrative of suicide as romantic and traditional, an exercise of freedom of choice, and as protest against society, has continued and strengthened ever since Dazai's suicide.

#### The 1980s to late-1990s: A Stable Classic?

Finally, in the 1990s, the asset bubble of the 1980s burst, ushering in what is commonly known as The Lost Decade:

Japan has experienced prolonged and pervasive adversity in the recession-plagued 1990s, shaking beliefs, inclinations, relationships and patterns of behavior. ... Perhaps one of the most profound changes has occurred in the way that citizens view their government as a series of scandals and exposes of negligence, incompetence and mismanagement have undermined the edifice of power and status of those who rules. (Kingston, *Transformation* 81)

Kingston states in *Contemporary Japan* that “[i]t is during the Heisei era that Japanese

have learned much more about the wartime Showa era (1926-89), and the media has propelled and shaped this education, forcing people to reassess a past that reverberates throughout Japan and in the region” (28). Within this context of rapidly shifting views regarding the national narrative and governmental responsibility, young people in particular came under heavier scrutiny and criticism for “deteriorating ethics, morals and social order” (*Transformation* 93). Arguably, the symptoms of rapid economic development followed by the bursting of the ‘bubble’ must have shown itself through the behaviour of the young people—in some sense, the uncertain times the young people lived through then was not dissimilar to the 1930s, when Dazai Osamu was seen as a representative of a new generation that has lost faith in humanity.

Interestingly then, it is worth considering the fluctuations in Dazai Osamu’s popularity during the mid-1980s to the end of the 1990s. Dazai Osamu continued to remain popular: a piece in 1988 focuses on Dazai’s popularity with overseas readers and suggests that it is due to more people resonating with the “human weakness” depicted in his works (*Asahi Shimbun*, 15 June 1988), and the 1996 winners of the Akutagawa Prize, Yu Miri and Tsuji Hitonari, both cited Dazai as their favourite author, which shows “he still has a strong influence [not just for a wider audience but also] on a new generation of writers” (*Asahi Shimbun*, 10 Feb 1997). However, the numbers tell a different story from

the previous three decades. In 1991, around four hundred fans attended the *ōtōki* memorial, down from the peak of a thousand in 1982. According to Yamamoto Takao, who led the Mitaka Dazai Osamu Research Association then, “Dazai was the fashion fad for a period of time. Now, the people who really like him attend [the memorial], which is why there has been an increase in the number of older attendees.” This is as compared to the late 1960s to early 1970s, which saw a large number of young female fans (*Asahi Shimbun*, 20 June 1991). In 1993 the numbers dropped to two hundred (*Asahi Shimbun*, 20 June 1993). From 1994 to 1996, there was also ongoing argument about whether to place a monument at the Tamagawa River in his memory, with some believing that there should not be attention drawn to the place where he had committed suicide; in the end a memorial stone without any inscription was decided on, which makes one wonder what the point of it was (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 17 June 1996).

However, in 1998, his fiftieth death anniversary, there was a sharp increase in activity and interest surrounding him. The Dazai Osamu Award was revived after twenty years, Chikuma Shobo made a tenth print run of its Dazai Osamu *zenshū*, and the Dazai Osamu Memorial Museum, *Shayōkan*, began operation. According to a Kadokawa editor, “Dazai and Natsume Soseki enjoy stable popularity, regardless of the times” (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 19 June 1998). This suggests two possibilities: firstly, Dazai has become a

stable part of the Japanese literary canon after more than four decades of being integrated into the *kokugo* syllabus. While he is still more popular than many other writers, aside from significant annual milestones there is no longer the intense fervour that surrounded him from the 1950s to 1980s. This brings us to the second observation: Dazai Osamu is now celebrated as an important cultural and literary figure at every milestone (such as the fiftieth anniversary of his death in 1998 and his centennial anniversary in 2009). This keeps him continuously alive in the cultural imagination. The activities in 1998 were a deliberate effort made by fans and cultural institutions to revive interest in him, and these activities continue into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In other words, though his works still generate interest and he is read as a canonical figure in the education system, it appears that there is vested interest among fans to celebrate him at regular intervals and highlight his eternal relevance.

In conclusion, from the actions and words of the young readers, what surfaces is clear—and sometimes blind—admiration of Dazai, often based on a limited understanding of his texts, with a strong focus only on *Ningen shikkaku*. The popular interpretation that emerged since Dazai's death did not see much change over the decades: he is rebellious, charming, and moody, and it is his empathy for the weak that appeals particularly to his readers. As we shall see in Chapter Two, deliberate attempts by

such figures as Dazai's relatives and the publishers of his works to change his image had an effect on the dominant interpretation and view of him and, eventually, the popular culture works about him.

### 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Adaptations and Transformations of Dazai and His Works

While this section will not go into detail about each adaptation, it provides an overview of the various works that have adapted Dazai's texts and life into different media and suggests that they are precursors to the 21<sup>st</sup>-century adaptations that will be examined in Chapters Three and Four. While these 20<sup>th</sup>-century adaptations are more literary or autobiographical in nature, the 21<sup>st</sup>-century works are more transformative, suggesting that there might have been more interest during the 2000s to 2010s in transformative play and adapting Dazai Osamu into a new context, while in the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was more appetite for presenting literature in different media. The section after this focuses on a case study of two 1967 theatrical adaptations of Dazai Osamu's life in order to show how the audience demanded a certain image of Dazai to be adequately presented, which in turn suggests a dominant interpretation of Dazai Osamu as not only brooding but also charming has formed among the audience.

As discussed in the introduction, adaptation of literary works into film already has an established history in Japan, and as such Dazai Osamu's works enjoyed similar adaptive treatment. Just a year after his death, the movie *Guddobai* (Goodbye), directed by Shima Koji and released by Shin Toho, was played in cinemas (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 26 June 1949), and in 1963 a movie based on Dazai's "Hazakura to mateki" (The Magic Flute and Fallen Cherry Blossoms) was released with the title *Mashiroki fuji no ne* (The Base of a Snow-White Mount Fuji) (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 01 Oct 1963). Director Yoshitome Kohei began his directing career with *Shin ningen shikkaku* (New Human Failure), released in 1978, a modern adaptation of the novel *Ningen shikkaku* (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 14 June 1978). Adaptations of his works were not restricted to the silver screen; as television sets became more widely available and affordable, the number of television drama adaptations of Dazai Osamu's works also increased. In 1957, a drama based on Dazai's *Shinshaku shokoku banashi* (A New Version of Folktales Around the World) was released on NTV (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 18 Dec 1957); in 1959, there was a one-hour television drama based on *Roman dōro* (Roman Road) (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 04 Jan 1959). Not all of these dramas were necessarily a success: a 1960 NTV adaptation titled *Awayuki no roman* (The Romance of Gentle Snow) was unfavourably reviewed in the *Yomiuri Shimbun* for lacking dramatic appeal to the masses, "because in the end it is an adaptation

based on a literary work” (07 Dec 1960). Despite the failure of *Awayuki no roman* due to the perceived incompatibility of literature and mass appeal, the interest in adapting Dazai Osamu for the television screen was not dampened. In 1962, an 8-episode television drama adaptation of *Shayō* was broadcast on TBS (*Asahi Shimbun*, 14 May 1962), and in 1964 a drama based on *Kyōō fujin* (The Sociable Madam), titled *Okusama wa ohitoyoshi* (His Wife is Very Friendly), was released on NTV (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 23 Apr 1964). Finally, the 1979 TBS television drama titled *Fuyu no hanabi—watashi no Dazai Osamu* (Fireworks in Winter—My Dazai Osamu), which traced Dazai’s life from when he was a high school student to when he committed suicide, was the first adaptation of his life rather than his works.

As seen from the overview above, there was a wide variety of texts adapted into screen, which is not reflective of the actual popularity of his texts—*Ningen shikkaku* appeared to be his most widely read text, yet it only had one approved adaptation for the film screen. In 1994, Tsushima Michiko protested against a television drama with the title *Ningen shikkaku* being broadcast on TBS; while the content had no connection to the novel, she stated “it will bring about misunderstanding of Dazai’s works and harm his name” (*Asahi Shimbun*, 06 July 1994). Aside from the above two productions, the comparative lack of attention to his representative work could be explained by the lack of

its dramatic appeal for the screen. Author and critic Koyano Atsushi explained, “Mishima and Tanizaki do have plenty [of works adapted into film]. However, those were meant to appeal to the masses; they wrote those works with an eye for adaptation to film. I don’t think Dazai had that luxury. If he had lived longer, perhaps he might have written more works suited for the screen.” The KADOKAWA chairman, Kadokawa Tsuguhiko, stated the problem with *Ningen shikkaku* is how it ends with the protagonist as a useless person, which “is not an acceptable ending for commercial films” (*Asahi Shimbun*, 13 June 2009). As we shall see in Chapters Three and Four, the constraints of film adaptation might not necessarily apply to manga and animation adaptations, and there was also a shift in how *Ningen shikkaku* is interpreted to make it more suitable for the silver screen.

Beyond the cinema and the television, Dazai Osamu’s works also enjoyed popularity in the theatre and on the radio. As early as 1948, nearly half a year after his death, there was a theatrical adaptation of *Shayō* (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 17 Nov 1948). In December of the same year, there was yet another theatrical production of *Shin Hamuretto* (New Hamlet) (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 17 Dec 1948). *Shayō* received another theatrical adaptation in 1979, released to favourable reviews due to Okada Mariko’s acting (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 12 Oct 1979). In the early 1980s, there were theatrical runs of “Hashire Merosu” (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 01 Mar 1984). However, in contrast to the



television dramas, which mostly adapted Dazai's literary works, there were more theatrical productions focused on adapting Dazai's life for the stage from the mid-1960s. In 1967, the year Zenrinji began distributing queue tickets to control the crowd for the *ōtōki* memorial, there were two theatrical productions that caused a stir—"Dazai Osamu no shōgai" (Dazai Osamu's Life) and "Ōtō no ki." (Memoirs of Cherries). The report presents it as a competition between productions due to the similarity in theme—both about Dazai's life—as well as both runs having begun on the same date (*Asahi Shimbun*, 21 Apr 1967). And in 1988, playwright Kitamura So's work, which focuses on Dazai Osamu's lovers' suicide, was performed in the Shibuya Jan Jan theatre (*Asahi Shimbun*, 03 Aug 1988).

Like the theatrical adaptations, there seems to have been a balance between adapting Dazai's life as well as his works in the radio dramas, though there were also fewer adaptations into radio drama, making it hard to draw a conclusive statement. In 1957, there was a radio drama adaptation of one of the stories in *Otogibanashi* (Folktales) (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 12 July 1957). In 1963, the NHK *kyōiku terebi* (Educational Television) broadcasted "Kakekomi uttae" (A Rushed Complaint) based on Dazai Osamu's work; the title of the newspaper write-up—"Seinen yuda no nayami to gendai seinen no nayami" (The Troubles of a Young Judas, the Troubles of Youth

Now)—suggests the story was interpreted as a parallel to modern times and modern young people’s worries (*Asahi Shimbun*, 08 June 1953). Finally in 1971, “Yumura no haru” (The Spring of Yumura), a fictional piece based on Ozawa Yoshiko’s memories of Dazai and with an anti-war theme, began to be broadcast.

From 1980, there appeared more biographical accounts of Dazai Osamu, which stirred public interest. In 1980, Dazai’s editor, Nohara Kazuo, published his memoirs of Dazai Osamu, and it was in such demand that it was sold out two weeks after release for sale (*Asahi Shimbun*, 08 Mar 1980). 1980 was also the year that medical records by a doctor who oversaw Dazai Osamu’s treatment while he was in a mental asylum were released for public viewing (*Asahi Shimbun*, 29 June 1980). In 1986, two texts based on Dazai Osamu’s life—*Dazai Osamu to watashi* (Me and Dazai Osamu) by Ishigami Gen’ichiro and *Ganshū no hito* (A Bashful Person) by Yashiro Seiichi—were published, the former based on the author’s experience as Dazai’s classmate, the latter based on the playwright’s experience encountering Dazai’s texts. The article that introduces both texts states “if we consider Dazai’s life as a text as well, these two works provide unique “readings” on two extremes” (*Asahi Shimbun*, 07 July 1986). Though the theatrical productions from 1967 onwards started the ball rolling, it appears that the 1980s saw renewed interest in exploring Dazai Osamu’s life. It was also from the 1980s that there

were exhibitions about Dazai Osamu, such as the 1982 Dazai Osamu Exhibition in Kichijoji (*Asahi Shimbun*, 29 May 1982), the 1998 exhibition commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death (*Asahi Shimbun*, 14 Nov 1998), and the 1999 exhibition titled “Dazai Osamu no nijū seiki” (Dazai Osamu’s 20<sup>th</sup> Century), in commemoration of him before the turn of the millennium (*Asahi Shimbun*, 01 May 1999).

To conclude this section, we can see Dazai Osamu’s works being adapted into a variety of media and, gradually, there being more interest among the public in watching and reading accounts of or adaptations of his life, not just literary adaptations. While the 21<sup>st</sup> century continues to have a mixture of adaptations of his texts as well as transformative works based on his life, we will see a gradual shift in the way Dazai’s life and personality are depicted. The following case study shows how the audience had certain expectations of Dazai’s personality that they wished to see in theatrical productions, an illustration of how the popular interpretation has an effect on transformative works.

#### Case Study: Two 1967 Theatrical Productions about Dazai’s Life

1967 was the year when Dazai’s post-death popularity reached a climax, and this

did not abate until the early 1980s. While it is difficult to conclude whether the theatrical works contributed to his popularity or if they were riding on his popularity, this thesis argues that they show how an audience watches transformative works about Dazai with an expectation that they will conform or adhere to the dominant imagining of him. In particular, at this time, the dominant interpretation was of Dazai as a simultaneously despairing and charming man who deserved compassion.

The theatrical adaptations were announced as a dramatic “competition” due to their runs overlapping. The first one, titled “Dazai Osamu no shōgai,” starred Nakamura Kichimon; the second one, titled “Ōtō no ki,” starred Iwashita Hiroshi. “Dazai Osamu no shōgai” covers Dazai’s life from his life as a young boy to the day he committed lovers’ suicide and is based on several of Dazai’s works, including “Omoide,” *Biyon no tsuma* (*Villon’s Wife*), *Ningen shikkaku*, *Shayō*, and *Guddobai*. According to the creator, Shiina Ryuji,

I have never met Dazai Osamu, and even though I read what those who knew him said about him, every single one had a different interpretation of him. So my best sources were the books Dazai had written; I wanted to present a Dazai Osamu on stage that I gleaned from his texts. So I am not concerned about if this is the real Dazai Osamu; I focused on re-creating the author Dazai and the people around him—or versions of them—as presented in the texts. (*Asahi Shimbun*, 21 Apr 1967)

Shiina was conscious of the fact that it was impossible to represent the “real” Dazai

Osamu and what he could present was only the versions as seen in the texts. In other words, he worked with the “original” to the best of his ability. “*Ōtō no ki*” also focuses on Dazai’s life, but with a different centre: using the 1947-1948 timeline as a pivot, it goes back and forth between the post-War time and the various interactions Dazai had with the women, friends, and authors in his life. The creator, Ima Harube, knew Dazai during their schooling years, and according to him,

The only impression left of Dazai is of him after the War. Most people think he is a self-destructive writer, but Ibuse Masuji and I knew him as a healthy, spirited person. I wanted to challenge the existing myths and rumours about him and present him as I knew him. In addition, I wanted to write about why he had no choice but to commit lovers’ suicide with Yamazaki Tomie. (*Asahi Shimbun*, 21 Apr 1967)

As can be seen, the two creators used different material to present their versions of Dazai Osamu: Shiina worked with the original texts, Ima worked with the “real” Dazai Osamu. However, I argue that while Shiina denies trying to present the “original” Dazai Osamu, the title, “Dazai’s Osamu *Life*” (my emphasis), and the attempt to piece him together through his texts does show a desire to arrive at some form of reality, and as such, the play was viewed and critiqued according to the viewer’s comparison with the “real” Dazai.

The reviews of the plays were particularly harsh for “Dazai Osamu no shōgai.” A review in the 10 May 1967 *Asahi Shimbun* stated that the acting was excellent but the

script was weak, presenting “only [Dazai]’s gloomy depression, without any of his charm,” and a reviewer for the 15 May 1967 *Yomiuri Shimbun* review stated, “No matter how hard [the viewer] tried, [the viewer] was unable to derive the sense that even while Dazai led a degenerate lifestyle, he was still a man who produced excellent works. Kichiemon’s Dazai seemed to hesitate on the crossroads, between showing how hardworking he was as a writer and how charming he was as a person.” The reviews agreed that there was a sense of incompleteness or caricature to the Dazai portrayed in “Dazai Osamu no shōgai,” and eminent Dazai scholar Okuno Tateo was similarly resistant to this play. He stated that there were exaggerations which were necessary to a theatrical production but which could not represent all of Dazai. After watching both plays, he stated that the actors for Dazai in both adaptations had looks that matched the real Dazai and had excellent acting skills, which agrees with the earlier review. However, he critiqued “Dazai Osamu no shōgai” for presenting Dazai as an “abnormal, even crazed person,” and prefers Ima’s version which is based on the “real” Dazai. The conclusion of his review is that all readers have a version of Dazai in their hearts due to the personability in Dazai’s writing which addresses the reader directly, making them feel involved, and hence the difficulty or impossibility of representing Dazai’s person in transformative works (*Asahi Shimbun*, 27 May 1967).

Though Okuno felt a resistance towards any attempt to present the “real” Dazai (as well as contradictory stances, given his appreciation of “*Ōtō no ki*” which is based on Ima’s personal knowledge of Dazai), a sizable number of fans watched the plays, which suggests there was considerable interest in creative works that presented not just Dazai’s Osamu’s works, but Dazai himself. Five hundred fans attended the Yomiuri Reading Salon on 10 September 1967 due to the presence of two speakers: Sugimori Hisahide, author of *Kunō no kishu Dazai Osamu* (The Troubled Flag-Bearer Dazai Osamu), and Nakamura Kichiemon, who acted as Dazai in “Dazai Osamu no shōgai” (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 11 Sep 1967). Though the article does not mention how the attendees felt about the play, we can conclude there must have been some level of discussion and excitement about these transformative works for there to be such a high attendance that the journalist called it *seikyō* (extremely successful turnout).

In conclusion, the available articles about the plays tell us the following: firstly, there was interest among creators in presenting some version of Dazai Osamu, whether it is a version created through his texts or through personal knowledge of him; secondly, there was demand from both scholarly and non-scholarly reviewers alike for Dazai’s “charm” and “personable traits” to be reflected, not just his gloomy aspect; thirdly, there was interest from readers for these adaptations and transformative works. I would like to

focus particularly on the second conclusion: despite the agreement by Shiina and Okuno that every reader has a “Dazai Osamu” in their heart, there seemed to be general traits that must go into every representation of Dazai Osamu, namely his charm. The gloominess was not so much questioned as the excess of it; the implied meaning was that if there had been a balance of depressive gloom and charm, “Dazai Osamu no shōgai” would possibly have been more favourably reviewed. Using the simplified model of the book history cycle proposed in the Introduction, it appears that the dominant view of Dazai being tragic and charming, built by the media since 1948 and accepted by both professional critics and fans alike, has an effect on how transformative works about Dazai are received. In other words, it is no longer marketable to refer only to the original texts as Shiina had—the general mood of the viewers and their love for a specific version of Dazai must be taken into account when creating works about Dazai Osamu.

The decades after Dazai’s death saw widespread interest in adapting his life and texts for different media, and one can see the trend that where new media were more widely available, particularly the television, there was an added incentive to adapt his texts for that particular medium, shifting the historical trend of adapting literary texts for the silver screen to the home screen. In a very general sense, there was also an increasing interest in adapting Dazai’s life for different media rather than only his texts, which



suggests his life and death held at least equal appeal for the general reading public and audience. It is in Chapter Two where I will examine the popular discussion surrounding Dazai in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to see what continuities as well as changes there were in the popular perception of Dazai Osamu.

## Chapter Two: From Tragic to Lively—The Change in the Popular View of Dazai Osamu in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

It is August of 2021. After a train ride from Aomori to Goshogawara, the final leg of my journey to Dazai's hometown of Kanagi is on the Tsugaru Railways. The train that awaits travellers on the Goshogawara platform is the *Hashire Merosu* train. On board, travellers are greeted by excerpts from Dazai Osamu's works on the carriage decor. As it is summer, the wind chimes tinkle under the breeze from the air-conditioner, providing a backdrop to the train conductor reading excerpts from Dazai Osamu's *Tsugaru* as passengers travel through the Tsugaru plains. Before Kanagi Station, passengers are each given maps with suggested walking tours to get the full Dazai Osamu pilgrimage experience.

The pilgrimage begins with the road leading to the Dazai Osamu Memorial Museum, aptly named Dazai Road. Another road, Melos Road, branches off it and leads to the museum as well. At the memorial museum, a figurine of Dazai, wearing a mask as per COVID-19 regulations, reminds similarly masked visitors to stay safe and simultaneously shows how Dazai Osamu is keeping with the times. Before leaving the museum, one has the opportunity to buy merchandise: postcards that are reproductions of

Dazai's photographs, T-shirts with quotable quotes from his texts, and magnets so that the buyer is reminded of him every time he or she opens the refrigerator.



Fig. 1: The Dazai Osamu figurine with the name tag “Tsushima-kun” warmly welcomes visitors to the Dazai Osamu Memorial Museum, with a reminder to keep face masks on.  
(Photo taken by this researcher.)

This is, and is not, the Dazai Osamu experience of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. To the extent that this represents only the official experience of Dazai Osamu (the memorial museum being the most official of sites related to him), it cannot be said to be a complete representation of what Dazai Osamu is now, what interpretations of him persist, and what new readings fans and creators are constructing of him. Chapter One concluded that the

media sensationalism concerning his suicide had a crucial role in focusing the public's attention on Dazai Osamu, and the discussion among scholars, fans, and journalists throughout the decades after his death cemented the image of him as a mysterious, charming, tragic writer whose post-War representative work made him universally relatable over time. In this chapter, I ask the following questions: what were the media and popular views of Dazai Osamu in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Were they significantly different or similar to the interpretations from the 20<sup>th</sup> century? If so, in what ways were they different or similar?

It is in this chapter that I wish to integrate my literary pilgrimage experiences of Dazai Osamu with an examination of current readers' perceptions of Dazai Osamu. Aside from ethnographic research through literary pilgrimages, in a similar manner to Chapter One, I will be examining newspaper reports, write-ups, and interviews about Dazai Osamu from the three major Japanese newspapers: *Asahi Shimbun*, *Mainichi Shimbun*, and *Yomiuri Shimbun*.

In this chapter, I argue that figures such as Dazai Osamu's eldest daughter, Tsushima Sonoko, together with tourism sites that benefit from Dazai literary pilgrimages, cultural institutions related to Dazai Osamu such as the Dazai Osamu Memorial Museum,

and publishers of his works, all sought to change Dazai's image to a lively and humorous one, in a clear shift away from the tragic and gloomy post-War image that had been the dominant reading in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. More specifically, Dazai Osamu's image became that of a guiding light who is not only empathetic towards human weaknesses but is also a spokesperson for building, maintaining, and repairing human bonds. In addition, the popular culture sphere in the 21<sup>st</sup> century saw a strong wave of works of historical and anthropomorphic re-imagination; in this context, the lively, humorous reading of Dazai Osamu is established strongly as he is re-made into handsome and charismatic manga, anime, and game characters, decisively changing his image from that of the tragic post-War figure and forming a new basis for future transformative works. I will begin by examining 21<sup>st</sup>-century newspaper articles about Dazai Osamu to see what the differences are between the 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century interpretations of him. Following that, I will integrate my experience of a literary pilgrimage into the understandings gained from the examination of the newspaper articles to demonstrate how official Dazai Osamu agents have concretely changed his image. Finally, I will conclude with a brief case study of artwork for *Bungō sutoreii doggusu* literary-animanga pilgrimages, focusing particularly on artwork for author-specific museums, to illustrate how the dominant reading of him as an important and lively guiding light has been reflected in a transformative work of

popular culture.

Crossing from the 20<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Charming and Humorous—Dazai Osamu as an

Eternal Guiding Light

Broadly, there are four notable changes in the discussion surrounding Dazai Osamu in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Firstly, there is naturally a change in the age range of his fans: it is now a broader range due to the fact that many of his post-War fans are by now elderly, but he still continues to attract younger fans, such that in any memorial gathering one sees people from across several generations. As such, the media is quick to present this as evidence that Dazai Osamu's texts are eternally relevant and interesting. For instance, a member of the Dazai Osamu Salon was quoted as saying, "You think you understand him, but when you read again, there will be new aspects that you won't have understood. And that is how you read him over and over again," which suggests his works are not time- or context-bound (*Asahi Shimbun*, 13 Feb 2020). Aside from official agents explaining Dazai Osamu's eternal relevance, the newspapers also provide anecdotal evidence that Dazai Osamu appeals to a wide range of people: during the annual memorial event in Kofu City's Misaki Shrine, 17 June 2000, an elderly fan reflected that "[she] read Dazai

Osamu voraciously after the War and in [her] student years. [Her] generation should be called the generation of the Dazai Osamu Syndrome.” In that same event, a high school student said he or she hopes to read Dazai Osamu’s works “from now on,” and it is unclear whether he or she had read any of his works before attending the memorial or whether he or she had attended merely out of curiosity (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 18 June 2000).

It seems these two interviewees were selected for the contrast in their ages as well as the contrast in their reading experiences of Dazai Osamu, with one having “voraciously” read his works and the other having read many fewer or none, to show Dazai Osamu’s cross-generational charm. In July of the same year, the Hirosaki Dazai Osamu Boarding House Preservation Society also held a talk with the theme “Dazai Osamu’s High School Years.” While it was held in the Hirosaki Girls’ Kosei Gakuin, the talk was open to the public (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 05 July 2000). It is unknown how many members of the public they attracted; the only conclusion we can make is that they anticipated it being popular enough that it was not just the school students who wanted to attend.

At least part of Dazai Osamu’s continued popularity can be attributed to the numerous and varied events about him throughout the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which not only attracted fans but kept him continuously in the public eye. The opening event of a new cultural facility, the music salon in Kiunkaku (Atami Prefecture), during

which actor Emori Toru read excerpts from *Ningen shikkaku* and “Hashire Merosu,” offers concrete numbers: 165 members of the public attended it. The establishment boasts a connection to Dazai Osamu; three months before he committed suicide, he was said to have completed *Ningen shikkaku* in an annex of the Kiunkaku (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 09 Dec 2000). Ota Haruko gave a talk about her father, Dazai Osamu, in the Yomiuri Cultural Salon to approximately a hundred female guests, and the article reporting the event concluded that her talk had received “rousing applause” (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 26 Mar 2001). Around two hundred Aomori locals participated in another of her talks in the Hachinohe Plaza Hotel in July 2001. Considering that tickets cost 3000-yen per participant, which meant a higher barrier of entry than the free talks and events, this turnout was indicative of Dazai Osamu’s continued popularity (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 31 May 2001, and *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 03 July 2001). Koyano Yoshiaki, representative of the Mitaka Tourism Guide Association, said this of Mitaka in 2002: “While there are more people visiting Mitaka for the Ghibli Museum, the Dazai Osamu sightseeing spots have a deep-rooted popularity,” which suggests the opening of popular culture sites did not diminish Dazai’s popularity and perhaps even hints that there is a mutually beneficial and complementary relationship between animation and Dazai Osamu (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 19 Feb 2002). Dazai remains popular to the extent that when there was a Dazai Osamu Quiz held in Mitaka in 2009, the



organisers had to increase the number of seats from one hundred to two hundred in order to handle the demand. The title of the article, fittingly, states that “the sun has not yet set,” as a tongue-in-cheek reference to Dazai Osamu’s *Shayō* (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 18 Apr 2009). He is now also accessible in a variety of ways, including food: thirty-two boxes of a Dazai *ningyō-yaki* (red bean-filled pastries shaped like a face), with the design of Dazai resting his cheek on a palm, were sold out during the 2015 memorial at Mitaka (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 20 June 2015). Whether one spends 3000-yen or 300-yen, the places and agents related to Dazai Osamu have ensured that there are always ways to enjoy Dazai Osamu’s presence.

It would also be remiss to not cover the *ōtōki* memorials: they continued to draw fans, and in 2009 attendance reached the height of a thousand people, equivalent to 1982 when Dazai Osamu reached his peak in post-mortem popularity (*Asahi Shimbun*, 03 July 2009). Several of the attendees shared thoughts that were very similar to those from three or more decades ago: a university student who attended the 2002 memorial stated that “even though [Dazai Osamu] was quite a vagabond, there is a lot about his honesty with himself that resonates with me” (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 20 June 2002, “54-kaime”); in a similar memorial event in Miyazaki City, where fans from different generations discussed his works, another university student shared that “Dazai’s works are intriguing because they show both the surface and the hidden emotions” (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 20 June 2002,

“sedai-koe”); and a 61-year-old attendee in the 2006 memorial event in Aomori said, “[Dazai’s] works, which I encountered during my secondary school years, continue to touch my heart even now I’m in my sixties” (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 20 June 2006). Thus, we can see that there is a certain image of Dazai that remains unchanged: he is honest and has a particular skill for probing under the surface of human interactions.

However, there is also a notable celebration of Dazai Osamu’s effect not only on the individual reader, but also on communities. For instance, there are some who expressed the wish for Dazai’s works to continue to be popular due to the representation of the region’s narratives in them: a 53-year-old attendee in the 2007 memorial event in Aomori stated, “Inclusive of my town, I want to know more about the places and people in *Tsugaru* and pass those stories down the generations” (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 20 June 2007). On the more playful end, fans bond and “re-create” Dazai’s presence by cosplaying as him, wearing his signature mantle during the memorial event (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 14 June 2008), and a regular fan even showed a reporter how to place cherries into the tomb’s engraving in the 2008 memorial, which suggests communication and friendship between strangers during this event (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 20 June 2008, “jūnin to iro”). In that year, 2008, five hundred fans attended the memorial in Mitaka, with the increase in number attributed to the opening of the Dazai Osamu Literature Salon (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 20 June

2008, “botsugo 60-nen—Zenrinji de ōtōki”). 2009, the year of Dazai’s centennial, brought even more fans to gather at his grave, though the *Yomiuri Shimbun* is not specific about the numbers, stating only that “a large number of fans visited and prayed [for Dazai] from eight in the morning” (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 19 June 2009, “genkō”). In that same year, eight hundred fans attended the unveiling of the Dazai Osamu statue in Ashino Park, Kanagi, where Dazai’s eldest daughter, Tsushima Sonoko, said, “Dazai must be raising his glass in a toast to his many friends [who have gathered here],” her phrasing suggesting that all the gatherers are part of a community of “friends” of Dazai (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 20 June 2009). The reports of the *ōtōki* memorial in the following years continued in the same vein, emphasising how passionate fans from all walks of life come together to celebrate Dazai Osamu, from the fan who took an overnight bus for eight hours to attend the memorial in Mitaka (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 19 June 2010), to the graduate student who fell in love with Dazai’s works during a university course (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 20 June 2011), to the restaurant owner who felt salvation because Dazai “shone a light on the weak” (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 20 June 2012), to the housewife who dreamt for fifty years of attending a memorial and was finally able to do so in 2014 (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 24 June 2014).

The second notable change was Dazai's increased presence and visibility overseas, as compared to in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Dazai had become a familiar name overseas when it comes to Japanese literature, such that in 2005 two French directors even visited Japan to gather materials for a documentary on "the secret behind Dazai Osamu's undiminishing popularity" (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 07 June 2005). According to them, not only does Dazai's prose feel modern,

[t]he times Dazai lived in and the times we live in now are uncertain periods. By capturing Dazai as a person who lived in his times, we hope to shine a light on the true value of his works. (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 20 June 2006)

By drawing a connection across time periods, the directors suggest Dazai's popularity is due to the evergreen quality of his works and, simultaneously, due to the similarities in the anxieties people face despite living in different time periods. A Spanish translation of Dazai's short stories was also published in 2017 in conjunction with the *ōtōki* memorial; according to the translator, Elena Gallego, "Hashire Merosu" in particular offers "healing...in a society where interpersonal relationships have become colder," which suggests Dazai's works remain relevant to a modern readership despite the changed contexts between when his works were published and the present (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 20 June 2017). According to a Taiwanese fan who attended the memorial in 2018, Dazai is

“extremely popular” in Taiwan (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 20 June 2018, “itsumo kokoro ni”). Luo Jiebin, a Chinese student, stated that Dazai’s kindness provided comfort to the lonely and that “it’s hard to believe he’s somebody who died more than seventy years ago,” which once more suggests a certain eternal quality to his works (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 20 June 2019). All of these voices from outside Japan, examined together, suggest two ideas: firstly, Dazai is read and understood universally, which adds strength to the narrative of him being a universal writer whose relevance is not confined to the time period of post-War Japan; secondly, there are profound similarities in the concerns people face despite the different time periods, which suggest either a cyclical nature to the anxieties people face or that the anxieties addressed in his works are eternal. Kayama Rika, a psychiatrist as well as professor at Rikkyo University, explained his popularity as follows:

[There are many] who seem to lead a life where all their needs are fulfilled, yet they find something lacking in life and do not harbour any hope for the future. While living with this sense of unease, these young people also have a narcissistic streak that might lead them to take extreme actions. I think there are more of them now than even in the post-War period. Dazai’s popularity has not waned as he is a spokesperson for these young people. (*Asahi Shimbun*, 03 July 2009)

Kayama’s interpretation of Dazai’s popularity is less forgiving than the reasons fans give for why they enjoy Dazai’s works, as she attributes his popularity to the narcissism Dazai

and his readers share. Nevertheless, there is an overlap between her interpretation and how fans state that they are drawn to the humanity, particularly the human weakness, that Dazai Osamu interrogates and explores in his works. However, in the 2000s and 2010s, there also emerged a separate though not unrelated narrative: Dazai is not just a gloomy writer; he is also humorous and brings light to people. This is the third notable change in the discussions surrounding Dazai.

I will begin to examine this change by analysing articles discussing Dazai Osamu from his centennial year (2009) to the 110<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth (2019). To begin with, Kinoshita Tatsumi, the Deputy of Education in Goshogawara, said “there is no kinder writer than Dazai Osamu” and reaffirmed that his kindness comes from having recognised his own weaknesses (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 19 June 2009, “yomazu kirai”). Kinoshita’s interpretation of Dazai is a continuation of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century public’s dominant view of Dazai Osamu. Several young women also shared the way in which Dazai’s account of his own struggles gave them clarity as to their own illnesses and weaknesses. A young woman from Gifu Prefecture who read *Shayō* during her university years understood she was suffering from depression and accordingly sought treatment; another young woman who lived in Tokyo was diagnosed with borderline personality disorder and she found comfort and understanding in Dazai’s works (*Asahi Shimbun*, 06 July

2009). However, there were also more voices that argued Dazai actually was not as gloomy or as focused on the despair and sufferings of humanity as the popular narrative suggested. For example, Hayashi Seiko, who was the model for the protagonist Shizueko in the short story “Merry Christmas,” said in an interview that Dazai was a very “cheerful person” and “an excellent conversationalist” (*Asahi Shimbun*, 04 June 2008), and the director of the Dazai Osamu Salon said his impression of Dazai, after having read all his works, was “very fresh” as compared to the image given by *Ningen shikkaku* (*Asahi Shimbun*, 07 June 2008).

However, after examining articles from the late 1990s to the early 2000s, I argue that this change did not occur suddenly. An anonymous contributor to the *Mainichi Shimbun*, whose penname is the single hiragana “ma,” actually noticed this aspect of Dazai Osamu since 1999. In his or her multiple visits to Kanagi, he or she noted that “one does not sense a gloomy image of him in Kanagi ... why is the image so different?” (18 June 1999). While the writer attributed part of the reason to Tsushima Sonoko requesting that Dazai’s memorial be renamed *jōtan-sai* (a celebration of birth), which shifts the focus from remembering Dazai’s suicide to celebrating his life, the *Mainichi Shimbun* writer did not give any other concrete reasons for why his image felt different. Watanabe Yutaka, another contributor to *Mainichi Shimbun*, wrote in 2001 that he prefers Dazai’s “unique

brand of humour” as compared to his pessimistic image, though an opinion in itself is not evidence that the general view of Dazai’s image had changed (20 June 2001). A fan who visited the 2006 memorial event at Mitaka stated that “even in his gloomy works, there was some form of jesting humour in them, which is the charm of his works [for me]” (*Asahi Shimbun*, 20 June 2006). Tsushima Sonoko, addressing the fans at the 2002 memorial event in Aomori, stated that she learnt to forgive her father’s misdeeds after reading the works published in the middle of his career and seeing the light in them (*Mainichi Shimbun*, 22 June 2002), and in the 2003 event she said “Dazai truly was a fun person. I hope for people to understand him correctly” (*Mainichi Shimbun*, 20 June 2003). Tsushima Sonoko’s remarks in particular suggests two ideas: firstly, with a broader reading of Dazai’s works beyond his post-War novels, the popular reading of him might change; secondly, there is a “correct” way to understand or read him, and that is of him as a fun, humorous person. Given Tsushima Sonoko’s position as Dazai’s eldest daughter and her regular attendance at the memorial events as a guest of honour, her words potentially hold more weight than others, though it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which her words affected the general reading public.

The above are individual experiences or understandings of Dazai Osamu’s image, and it was not until the late 2000s that there was concrete evidence that others, including



publishers, were actively trying to change Dazai's image, for instance, by using a *Tenisu no ōjisama* (*The Prince of Tennis*) character for the cover of Shincho Bunko's reprint of "Hashire Merosu" as well as "humorous snapshots" by photographer Ume Kayo for covers of ten Dazai Osamu works published by KADOKAWA. In Osabe Hideo's words, this emphasises that "Dazai was full of humour and "an author who made people laugh"" (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 19 June 2009, "akarui"). In a special edition of the magazine "Tōkyō-jin," Chuo University professor Watabe Yoshinori introduced "healthy" and "humorous" works written by Dazai while he lived in Mitaka, which seems to be a way to turn the spotlight on his lighter works (*Mainichi Shimbun*, 09 Nov 2008). During a recitation session in the Dazai Osamu Salon, which was popular enough that the organisers had to turn people away due to a lack of space, *Seihinsan* (A Tale of Honourable Poverty) was selected because "[they] wanted people to know about a side of Dazai Osamu that is rarely [discussed]" (*Asahi Shimbun*, 03 July 2008). Furthermore, there was a significant discovery in 2009: twenty-eight pages of poems and essays Dazai had written when he was sixteen. This discovery played an important role in the changing or reforming of Dazai's image. Ando Hiroshi, a professor of Japanese literature at Tokyo University who specialises in Dazai Osamu research, stated, "Before this discovery, we had not seen Dazai Osamu's poetry before. It's an incredibly important discovery that

allows us to peer into the naive, innocent teenager he had been before he wrote those literary works full of despair” (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 19 June 2009, “genkō”). Thus, it is around Dazai’s centennial anniversary that there was a much stronger recognition that Dazai’s gloominess was a persona rather than his entirety. In 2009, there was also an exhibition of photographs of Dazai taken by Tamura Shigeru, and the article introducing the exhibition included the following line:

There is no other modern writer who is so well-known by his portraits as Dazai Osamu is. He was particular about the way he looked, and he put up a “performance,” conscious of the fact that he was being looked at even in his private life. (*Asahi Shimbun*, 24 Nov 2009)

This suggests Dazai performed aspects of himself for the public—and even the private—eye, which thus brings forth the question of what his real person was as compared to what the popular interpretation makes him. The effort to change his image—or, at the very least, make it more multi-faceted—continued in 2014 when Hara Kiyo, who specialises in the recitation of literary works, organised an event titled “Dazai ni michibikarete” (Guided by Dazai). In this event, a documentary centred on interviews with Ono Saihachiro, one of Dazai’s disciples, was screened, with the aim of “introducing Dazai’s humorous side” (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 25 Sep 2014). In addition to emphasising his humour, there was also the official effort that the local Mitaka government put into

associating Dazai's suicide spot with beauty rather than despair, including increasing the number of cherry blossom trees along the Tamagawa River back to their past glory, as well as "making a connection between the river Dazai loved and the people of this city, creating bonds that surpass time and last into the future" (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 26 June 2015). Interestingly, a fan at the 2018 *ōtōki* memorial said this of Dazai: "While his gloomy image has been fixed, after reading the letters he left behind, I did not feel he had a hardened heart. I came to this memorial because I was curious about what sort of person he was" (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 20 June 2018, "kansha"). This implies that his gloomy image was something "decided on" or "set in stone" even if it is not necessarily true, or that the rest of his works have become more widely read, such that his popular image is no longer singularly that of a gloomy, despairing writer who focuses on human weaknesses. Finally, Daba Miyuki, who runs the Mitaka book cafe *Phosphorescence*, was also enthusiastic about letting people "know Dazai's charm in a new light" after seeing a photograph of Dazai Osamu in Bar Lupin, which was the opposite of his gloomy image (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 16 Mar 2019). According to her, "[Dazai's] way with words remains fresh. There is a treasure trove of words and phrases in his works that would even fit in social media," which suggests he has a freshness and vitality that appeals to modern readers (*Asahi Shimbun*, 21 June 2018).

In summary, there has been a visible and concerted effort to change Dazai Osamu's image, particularly since the 2000s, beginning with Tsushima Sonoko's wish for her father to be viewed in a positive light and snowballing into changes in the way people spoke of him during events. This change also happened during a time when there was an increased number of visitors to institutions dedicated to Dazai Osamu. The Dazai Osamu Memorial Museum reached a milestone number of visitors in both the early 2000s and late 2010s, with 300,000 visitors (a cumulative total since its opening) recorded in June 2001 (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 12 June 2001), and by August 2018 a cumulative total of two million visitors (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 18 Aug 2018); there were several literary plaques and monuments erected in his name in the same year, the most significant of which is the literary plaque in Ashino Park (Kanagi, Aomori Prefecture) (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 20 June 2001); finally, within three years of its opening, the Dazai Osamu Literature Salon also recorded a milestone of 30,000 visitors by June 2009 (*Asahi Shimbun*, 30 June 2009). However, it is difficult to conclude if the increased number of visitors was a result of the changed interpretation or if it led to the change in dominant reading, and I can only speculate that the web of relations between the institutions, the readers who might have put in more effort to read a greater variety of Dazai works, and the new Dazai material that surfaced and was highlighted had a lasting influence on changing the previously

dominant tragic reading of him.

Finally, the last notable change is the media into which Dazai's texts and life were adapted. This is less a reflection of readers' tastes changing as it is of a change in the media landscape. For instance, while sales of Dazai Osamu's works continued to do well—*Ningen shikkaku* was Shincho Bunko's top seller of 2001, with more than 6.6 million copies sold (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 04 June 2001), and in 2010 their publication of *Ningen shikkaku* sold more than 6.5 million copies (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 19 June 2010)—of special note is the Shueisha publication of *Ningen shikkaku* with the cover drawn by Obata Takeshi, renowned author of manga series *Hikaru no Go* (Hikaru's Go) and *Desunōto* (*Death Note*). This sold approximately 100,000 copies within three months of its release (*Asahi Shimbun*, 18 Sep 2007), a cumulative total of 210,000 copies within a single year (*Asahi Shimbun*, 18 June 2008), and more than a cumulative total of 437,000 copies within three years (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 23 Aug 2010). This suggests that the collaboration between the realms of animanga and literature had an encouraging effect on book sales and was well-received by the public. Furthermore, the Shincho Bunko editor, referring specifically to the popularity of the *Ningen shikkaku* and Obata collaboration, notes that "it is the truth that by changing the cover, the books sell" (*Asahi Shimbun*, 18 Sep 2007). In further evidence that a collaboration between the literary and animanga

realms proves beneficial, in an article discussing the popularity of *Bungō sutoreii doggusu*, a spokesperson for the Kanagawa Museum of Modern Literature states, “We hope [readers will] use the manga series as an entrance into the world of literature.” In the same article, a *Bungō sutoreii doggusu* fan left a message in the visitor book stating that he or she enrolled in the literature faculty of a university as the manga sparked their interest in Japanese literature, and another fan in his or her high school years says he or she developed an interest in the authors who appear in his or her textbooks due to the manga (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 10 May 2015). Interestingly, though there are other mediums, such as animation and games, worth commenting on, the newspaper articles mostly cover adaptations to manga. I tentatively argue that it could be due to two factors: firstly, Obata is a well-known name, which thus makes him media-worthy; secondly, the publishing and production team behind *Bungō sutoreii doggusu* actively sought collaborations with literary museums, which increased the visibility of the series whose primary storytelling medium was manga. As we shall see in Chapter Three, Dazai Osamu’s life and works were adapted into a variety of 2D and 3D media, beyond just the manga medium, to suit the contemporary audience’s taste.

In conclusion for this section, Dazai Osamu remained popular throughout the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, his popularity reflected in the attendance for events

about him as well as the age range of the attendees; this suggests that the concrete change of his image from a tragic post-War writer to a lively and humorous writer did not affect his popularity or that, conversely, it was even welcomed by fans. As Ando Hiroshi commented, “The requirement for an author to survive [into future generations] is that his or her works are read and interpreted differently as the times changes” (*Asahi Shimbun*, 23 Nov 2008). It seems Dazai has, indeed, succeeded in surviving, as he continues to remain relevant to his readers and be explored in different forms of media. It is in the next section that I will illustrate, through the places associated with Dazai Osamu, the efforts by official agents to maintain Dazai’s image as a guiding light for the present.

#### Official Narratives: Places, Pilgrimages, and Projects

The places associated with Dazai Osamu tell a story about how he is discussed and viewed and, to the extent that visitor interaction is allowed, how visitors interact with and affect Dazai’s image. In this section, I discuss the places associated with Dazai Osamu through both literary pilgrimages as well as an examination of official photographs uploaded on Dazai tourism sites to argue that the image of Dazai Osamu now leans strongly towards a bright, kind image, and a force for bonding and joy. I begin

with findings gleaned through my literary pilgrimage to Aomori, followed by an examination of the information provided by the Mitaka tourism site.

Pilgrimages as religious and spiritual journeys have enjoyed a long history in Japan. As a simple definition, pilgrimage is a journey from place to place where believers

[move] through time and space and the step-for-step process of seeking relief and enlightenment by following Buddhist teaching and/or the teachings of wise men of old (who in turn had followed Buddhist teachings) ... Accordingly, [Peter Ackermann] see[s] *junrei*, i.e. moving through time and space from station to station, as the basic form of travel for spiritual gain. (Ackermann 7)

It is worth noting that today, pilgrimage no longer has a strictly religious connotation: pilgrimages have increasingly become intertwined with tourism, with local governments promoting pilgrimages to religious, historical, and heritage sites in a bid to attract tourists (Del Alisal 76-80). Literary pilgrimage, arguably, is a form of cultural tourism, endorsed and in some cases planned by local governments in a bid to bring in revenue to any given area under their jurisdiction.

If Roman Catholicism has as its centre the Vatican, and Islam has as its centre the Mecca, then the Dazai Osamu Memorial Museum is the centre for literary pilgrimage about Dazai Osamu. Kanagi in Aomori Prefecture is where Dazai Osamu was born, and the Dazai Osamu Memorial Museum, *Shayōkan*, used to be his and his family's home.



*Marugoto Aomori*, a tourism website run by the Aomori Prefectural Government, has an entry dedicated specifically to Dazai Osamu literary tourism: not only do they list the addresses and opening hours of the facilities dedicated or related to Dazai Osamu, they emphasise his enduring popularity and assure visitors that these locations will “allow one to feel Dazai’s charm and his inner thoughts” (*Marugoto*). The list is complete with the suggested packed lunch one should buy at Shin-Aomori station to embark on this pilgrimage. Interestingly, however, the *Amazing Aomori* site (an Aomori tourism site maintained by the tourism arm of the prefectural government) does not have information pertaining to Dazai literary tourism. While it is difficult to make a conclusive statement about why Dazai Osamu is not included in their website, its focus on natural, historical, and religious sites suggests it caters to the average tourist rather than the literary tourist.

However, upon reaching Kanagi Station, one can understand why this “central” spot of Dazai Osamu literary pilgrimage is not easy to promote. The train ride from central Aomori to Goshogawara, inclusive of waiting for the transfer, takes an hour and a half to two hours, and from Goshogawara to Kanagi it is another twenty minutes, with an infrequent service from both transfer stations Hirosaki and Goshogawara stations. Kanagi is, apart from being a site for literary tourism, an otherwise residential town. The walking course, inclusive of visits to the memorial museum, the house where Dazai and his family

resided during the Second World War air raids, his former school, and the red-roofed restaurant near the park that houses his statue, can be completed in two to four hours, leaving nothing else for the tourist to do but travel back to Hirosaki or Aomori. It becomes clear why a general Aomori tourism site might hesitate to include Dazai Osamu in its list: it is a considerable amount of effort for the casual visitor to go through.

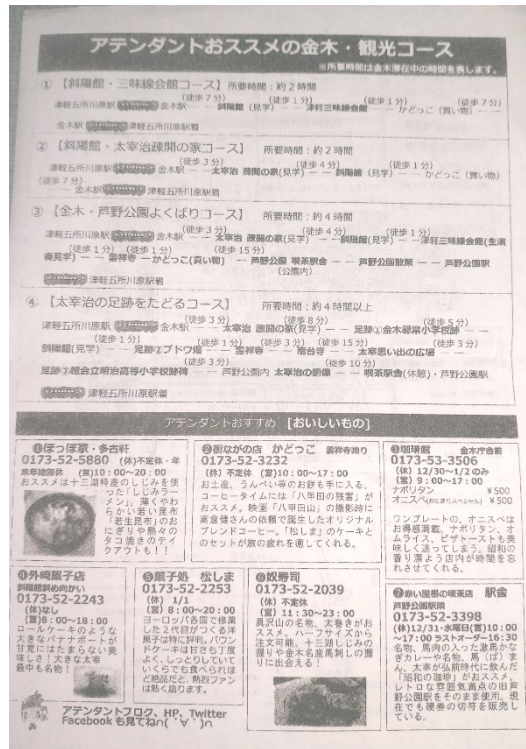


Fig. 2: The recommended Kanagi Tourism Course by the Tsugaru Railway attendants. The shortest is two hours long, the longest is slightly over four hours. Except for the *Tsugaru shamisen kaikan* (Tsugaru Shamisen Centre), all the places are directly related to Dazai Osamu.  
(Photo taken by this researcher.)

On the day I visited, in the middle of the 2021 summer vacation, the visitors to the

Dazai places of interest could be counted on two hands. However, the sites delivered what the *Marugoto Aomori* website promised; each had a careful curation of information and items about Dazai's life to place the visitor as directly as possible within the spaces he had inhabited, such as the room in the wartime home where Dazai Osamu met his mother for the first time in decades (depicted in the short story "Omoide"), or the room in the memorial museum where his mother used to live and that held great importance for Dazai Osamu. The kitschy elements are equally present; the wartime home had a table and cushion set exactly where Dazai had sat to compose his works, so that visitors could take photographs, and the museum had a replica of his coat that one could wear to imagine themselves as Dazai Osamu or re-create his iconic brooding pose:



Fig. 3: Visitors can sit at the exact spot Dazai Osamu sat in in the wartime evacuation house.

(Photo taken by this researcher.)



Fig. 4: Visitors at the memorial museum can wear a replica of Dazai's coat to take photographs.

(Photo taken by this researcher.)



Fig. 5: A photo spot similar to that of the wartime evacuation house is the last stop in the memorial museum, complete with another coat visitors can wear to take photographs with. (Photo taken by this researcher.)

The above photos show the blend between the commodification of Dazai Osamu and the preservation of literary history and agrees with John Fiske’s argument that “culture, however industrialized, can never be adequately described in terms of the buying and selling of commodities” (23). While there is indeed an element of kitsch in recreating Dazai Osamu by costume-playing, posing as him, and taking photos to remember the pilgrimage by (with the additional option of buying souvenirs),

In a consumer society, all commodities have cultural as well as functional values. To model this we need to extend the idea of an economy to include

a cultural economy where the circulation is not one of money, but of meanings and pleasures. ... In this economy there are no consumers, only circulators of meanings, for meanings are the only elements in the process that can be neither commodified nor consumed: meanings can be produced, reproduced, and circulated only in that constant process we call culture. (27)

The literary pilgrimage in official spaces thus serves the function of creating new meanings for Dazai Osamu through reader interaction with the spaces in which he lived. By recreating his iconic pose or wearing the coat cut in his favourite style, visitors keep Dazai Osamu alive in their minds and in these spaces, whether their version of Dazai Osamu is brooding, charming, tragic, lively, humorous, or any combination of the above, or otherwise. The above kitschy aspect of literary pilgrimages also agrees with Linda Hutcheon's idea regarding how viewers gain enjoyment and pleasure out of adaptation by reliving the familiar through new ways. In this case, the "new" is ourselves: we decide how to re-create Dazai Osamu through our bodies in these spaces.

Unfortunately, there is no way of knowing what version or reading of Dazai Osamu every single visitor brought to the table; I had personally decided on re-creating his camera-conscious brooding image, but that is one out of several possible readings of him. However, the memorial museum does offer an "official and updated" reading of Dazai Osamu through the videos it screened. Part of its project for Dazai Osamu's 110<sup>th</sup>

birth anniversary (2019) included collecting fan-made videos of the relationship among fans, Dazai Osamu, and Kanagi. Three of these videos were selected and screened in the memorial museum. These videos were also uploaded on Youtube for wider viewership. As of 30 September 2022, “Dazai Osamu e no dengon” (A Message to Dazai Osamu) had 679 views, “Ningen, shikkaku” (Human, Failure) had 301 views, and “Shayō no kokoro” (Heart of the Setting Sun) was the most successful with 9,408 views. These views were accumulated over 31 December 2019 to 30 September 2022, a total of 21 months, which averages to 32 views, 14 views, and 448 views per month for each video respectively. While “Shayō no kokoro” has received the highest amount of attention, the comments being turned off on the official channel makes it difficult to discern why it received so much more attention than the other two, and the low number of views for the first two suggests there is little effort to promote the videos. This suggests some disconnect between the official Dazai Osamu sites and the more general reading public beyond Aomori, as the literary site does not seem interested in making themselves visible to readers across Japan.

That said, the contents of the videos themselves suggest Dazai Osamu remains influential and relevant and, importantly, he is no longer a tragic figure but a guiding light who helps families reconcile or provides a connecting point between strangers. The

animation video “Ningen, shikkaku,” for instance, depicts a schoolboy who was named Osamu due to his father’s admiration for Dazai Osamu. Though the schoolboy commits suicide due to bullying and the father regrets not having repaired their relationship before his death, the father finds a hidden message in Osamu’s suicide note, which thanks the father for everything. The suggestion is that while the real Dazai Osamu never managed to reconcile with his father, there is possibility and hope, even amid despair, for any present-day “Osamu.” Another video, “Dazai e no dengon,” has a similar premise with a much more optimistic outcome. In the video, a young woman has enrolled in university in Hirosaki; she wants to study in Aomori due to her admiration of Dazai Osamu. Unknown to her, her mother was born in Kanagi and has been estranged from her own mother for decades. Due to the young woman’s journey to Kanagi with her mother, it gives her mother and grandmother a chance to reconcile. The suggestion is extremely strong that not only does Dazai Osamu continue to appeal to the young, he also guides people towards repairing ties. Finally, in “Shayō no kokoro,” a young woman travels to Kanagi, makes a connection with a young man who is lost and is seeking direction in life, and they explore the Tsugaru Peninsula together. While there are only hints that they are romantically attracted to each other, the video is a hopeful one of strangers connecting over literature and finding companionship and comfort due to Dazai Osamu.



Without exception, the videos emphasise Dazai's notable presence and influence and suggest he is eternally relevant, with two of the videos even showing either an animated or digitally superimposed figure of Dazai Osamu watching over these people from his old room in the memorial museum. The inclusion of an animated short suggests there is no limit to the medium fans can create these videos in, and they are perhaps even encouraged to explore any media, old and new, to their liking. The suggestion is thus strong that Dazai Osamu continues to be adaptable to all forms of media, just as he was in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and certainly now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with much more sophisticated technology. Importantly, they suggest that Dazai Osamu is more than a charming, mysterious, tragic author who writes on behalf of the weak. He is now a guiding light young people aspire to learn from, even a relationship guru.

Before ending this section, I will briefly examine Mitaka, one of the main sites of the annual memorial event. Dazai Osamu's final years were spent in Mitaka, he drowned in the Tamagawa River in 1948, and his grave is located in the local temple Zenrinji. Every year on the nineteenth of June, fans congregate and offer prayers (as well as boxes of cherries) in his memory. The Mitaka city website has a section dedicated to Dazai Osamu, with information about him and Mitaka sites related to him. Unsurprisingly, the memorial is also featured on one of their pages, and it shows both the elements of respect

and playfulness:



Fig. 6: A woman pays respects in front of Dazai Osamu’s grave, where cherries have been placed in the engraving of his name.

Source: Mitaka City Website,  
<https://www.city.mitaka.lg.jp/dazai/dazaitomitaka/outouki.html>.

As can be seen from the above photo, there are plenty of fresh flowers offered as per custom, and the woman is appropriately respectful as she prays in front of his grave. However, the cherries placed inside the engraving adds a playful touch even while they pay homage to Dazai Osamu. The fact that such a photo was included in the city website, “endorsed” by officials, strongly suggests this is acceptable behaviour. Following the argument that ever since the 2000s there was a concerted effort to change Dazai’s image into a lively and humorous one, such playful interaction with his grave is also in the spirit of celebrating his life, with the vibrant red fruit showing life and colour against the grim grey stone. The website also emphasises the celebratory spirit of the memorials. It quotes substantially from novelist Katsura Hidezumi as follows:

During the early memorial events, people who were close friends of Dazai invited his family members and, even if they did not do anything special, they ate cherries, drank wine, and reminisced over Dazai. ... Over time, the memorial became a Mecca for several hundreds of teenagers and young adults from all over the country to gather at, a pilgrimage of youth. ... Fifty years after Dazai's death, many of the people who knew Dazai have passed away. However, his works continue to attract young readers, and they continue to attend the memorial to have heart-to-heart conversations with Dazai. (qtd. in *Mitaka City*)

The quote reminds visitors that above all, the memorial is meant for the living to celebrate and connect with Dazai, and as such connotations of despair or tragedy are removed from or entirely absent from the event to begin with. The act of placing cherries in his tombstone has never been condemned and, over time, it becomes tradition. The above photo from the Mitaka website is from 2008, and in the following photo from the *Mainichi Shimbun* article of the memorial event in 2018, the Dazai-specific custom continues:



Fig. 7: A woman places cherries in Dazai's tombstone, while visitors wait on the narrow pathway for their turn to pay respects.

Source: *Mainichi Shimbun*, <https://mainichi.jp/articles/20180619/k00/00e/040/214000c>.

To conclude, the inclusion of such playful interaction with Dazai's tombstone in both official city websites and newspaper articles, without censure from Dazai's estate or living relatives, suggests this is an endorsed act that does not damage Dazai's image; on the contrary, this custom enhances and strengthens the reading of him as a writer with a good sense of humour who would appreciate this interaction with him. Read in conjunction with the 21<sup>st</sup>-century newspaper articles as well as the videos selected for screening at the Dazai Osamu Memorial Museum, it seems Dazai's changed image has been embraced by fans and is here to stay.

### Historical Fantasy and Anthropomorphic Re-Imagination: Dazai Osamu in the Context of a 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Popular Culture Trend

In the final section of this chapter, I will examine a popular culture trend that has gained strength over the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: historical fantasy as well as anthropomorphic re-imaginings. I argue that this trend shows an interest in playful,

imaginative interrogations of historical figures and objects, and in the context of this trend, transformative works with Dazai re-imagined as an animanga character strengthens the real Dazai's image as a guiding light for not only the present but also for literature as a whole. I first examine this trend then integrate pilgrimage artwork of the character Dazai Osamu to illustrate my argument.

Motegi Kennosuke, an associate professor at Tohoku University, describes historical figures being re-imagined as manga, anime, and game characters as follows:

In recent times, across several different cultures, there has been an increase in creative content wherein historical figures are re-imagined as characters. ... In the case of historical fiction, a story is created based on a specific time in history, with historical figures—famous or otherwise—who did exist ... but there is a distance [from reality] when it is historical figures re-imagined as characters. (30-32)

Particularly since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there has been a proliferation of historical fiction or, to be more precise, fiction with characters who are named after historical figures. However, Motegi argues that these characters are not necessarily grounded in the actual times and contexts in which the historical figures lived. When examining the reason for this proliferation and interest in such transformative works involving real figures, Motegi quotes Chida Hiroyuki, a Tokyo Gakugei University professor and specialist in popular culture, who believes “they reflect an avoidance of the

real world that continues to spin meaninglessly, and a desire to reset or restart reality.”

Motegi believes otherwise and sees them as a reflection of the continuity between the past and the present, the transformative works allowing us to examine our reality with a fresh perspective (40). His belief agrees with John Fiske, who argues that popular culture “has to be, above all else, *relevant* to the immediate social situation of the people” (25). In contrast (but not necessarily in contradiction), Nissim Otmazgin states that popular culture, in particular historical manga,

play[s] a meaningful role in constructing (and not only reflecting) history for a large number of people ... it overturns conventional wisdom on who are the driving forces and actors shaping politico-historic narratives. ... [and] may also be seen as a micro-cosmos of national politics in the sense that it provides a venue where different narratives emerge, interlink, and sometimes contradict each other. (9)

The trend of historical figures being re-imagined as characters includes characters who are not actually based on human beings but on concepts or items. For example, Miyake Toshio examines *Axis Powers Hetalia* (2006-), where “nations and world history are personified as cute boys” (152). In Miyake’s argument,

Entire nations are personified through a unified human body, personality, and name, contributing to the erasure of internal diversities and historical complexities. ... At the same time, it is the very anthropomorphic and caricaturized incarnation of modern nationhood, as seen in the insistence upon childish and intimate male-to-male relations, that introduces a fundamental ironic slippage to conventional images of world history,

international relations, and national politics. (167)

The anthropomorphic characters retain just enough stereotypes of the countries to be recognisable—America and Canada are often mistaken for each other; Japan becomes uncomfortable with close physical contact; China is immortal—but all are “cute boys” with typical *moe* (cute, attractive, infantilised) traits. In this case, the focus is not so much on in-depth and nuanced historical representation but imaginative fun based on familiar stereotypes that will appeal to its target audience. The wave of historical and anthropomorphic re-imagination continues: the Shinsengumi is reimagined in *Hakuōki* (2008-2014), historical Japanese swords are presented as beautiful young men and boys in *Tōken ranbu* (2015-), and battleships become young girls in *Kantai Collection* (2013-).

This wave of historical and anthropomorphic series suggests intense interest in imaginative play that blends fact and fiction, history and present, whether out of escapism from the present, interrogation of the past, or because they afford a lens through which to examine the present. Amidst this wave, Dazai Osamu has been re-imagined as a character in two especially popular historical-literary fictional works: *Bungō sutoreii doggusu* (2012-) and *Bungō to arukemisuto* (2016-). While both series will be discussed in Chapter Three with regard to how exactly they reimagine Dazai Osamu and how they contribute to the changing popular reading of him, this chapter wishes, as a continuation of literary

pilgrimages, to examine Dazai Osamu's special visibility and prominence in *Bungō sutoreii doggusu* as seen through the various collaborations held for this series, and argue how, for the modern audience, Dazai Osamu takes on the position of “guide” and “mentor” not only for their lives but also for literature as a whole, a marked change from the past dominant reading of Dazai as a tragic post-War writer, and therefore a representation of how Dazai Osamu has taken on a different meaning for the general public.

In *Bungō sutorii doggusu*, literary authors are re-imagined as characters in modern Yokohama but with Taisho Era elements. Dazai Osamu is not the protagonist of the series; Nakajima Atsushi is. However, Dazai Osamu plays a vital role as a senior and guide to Nakajima Atsushi: both are in the Armed Detective Agency and they are in opposition to the Port Mafia, and their goal is to keep Yokohama safe. *Bungō sutoreii doggusu* began as a manga series in 2012 and has since been expanded into a multi-media franchise with a series of light novels, an anime adaptation, an animated movie, theatrical plays, a mobile game, and three manga spin offs. The franchise has had a noticeable effect on young readers: the editor for the series, Kato Hirotsugu, stated, “Young readers who [originally] had no connection with literature have read those authors' works [after reading *Bungō sutoreii doggusu*]” (*Asahi Shimbun*, 06 Oct 2016), and there have even



been elementary school students who read the original authors' works (*Mainichi Shimbun*, 04 Jan 2014).

Most importantly for this chapter's argument, throughout the years since it began serialisation, the series have had numerous collaborations with literature museums. While some of the collaborations are with general literary museums, like the Kanagawa Museum of Modern Literature, some are with author-specific museums, such as the Kunikida Doppo Memorial House. What is of particular interest to this thesis is how Dazai Osamu is a central figure even in author-specific collaborations, which I believe shows the popularity of both animanga and the real Dazai Osamu, as well as symbolises his role in the literary landscape.

From July to September 2017, *Bungō sutoreii doggusu* held a collaborative exhibition with the Kunikida Doppo Museum in Saiki City (Oita Prefecture). In reality, Kunikida Doppo passed away in 1908, and Dazai Osamu was born in 1909, meaning there could have been no interaction between the two of them. However, in the manga series, Kunikida Doppo and Dazai Osamu are colleagues in the Armed Detective Agency and work on cases together. As part of the collaborative exhibition, Harukawa 35, the artist for the series, drew the following illustration for display as well as for the

collaboration merchandise:



Fig. 8: Harukawa 35's illustration of *Bungo sutoreii doggusu* characters Kunikida Doppo and Dazai Osamu for the 2017 Kunikida Doppo Museum Collaboration.

Source: *Bungō sutoreii doggusu*,  
<http://bungo-stray-dogs.jp/movie/news/?news=collabo-saeki>.

The illustration captures the personalities of the characters as well as their relationship:

Kunikida is serious, with a book in his lap, while Dazai is teasing and playful as he eats

sliced persimmons. The Dazai character's personality also complements the "real"

Dazai's personality or, at least, the popular reading of Dazai as of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

However, what is particularly intriguing to me is how Dazai Osamu was included in an

illustration for a museum dedicated not to him, but to Kunikida Doppo. In contrast, Harukawa 35 illustrated only the characters Tanizaki Jun'ichiro and his fictional sister, Naomi, for the 2016 collaboration with the Tanizaki Jun'ichiro Memorial Museum:



Fig. 9: Promotional Images for the 2016 collaboration with the Tanizaki Jun'ichiro Memorial Museum.

Source: *Natalie*, <https://natalie.mu/comic/gallery/news/202011/581687>.

The inclusion of Dazai Osamu in collaborations with author-specific museums was also observed in one other instance: the 2016 collaboration with the Nakahara Chuya Memorial Museum:



Fig. 10: Harukawa 35's illustration of *Bungo sutoreii doggusu* characters Nakahara Chuya and Dazai Osamu for the 2016 Nakahara Chuya Memorial Museum Collaboration.

Source: *Bungō sutoreii doggusu*,  
<http://bungo-stray-dogs.jp/movie/news/?news=collabo-nakahara>.

In reality, the real Dazai Osamu and Nakahara Chuya met in a bar and had a fight, and this antagonistic relationship is reflected in the manga where the characters are on opposing sides. Thus, whether it reflects reality or the events in the manga, it is more logical to include Dazai in an artwork for the Nakahara Chuya Memorial Museum collaboration than the Kunikida Doppo collaboration, though his place in a museum dedicated to another author is still slightly questionable. However, in the 2017 collaboration with the Nakahara Chuya Memorial Museum, Dazai was no longer included in the collaboration

illustration, which I believe is owed to the manga character Nakahara Chuya's increased popularity among readers.

Here, I propose two linked arguments. Firstly, the choice of which authors are included even in museums dedicated to a single author depends on the popularity and status of the “real” authors. I showed, in Chapter One, how Dazai Osamu was included in the *Nihon no bungaku* (The Literature of Japan) series as its third instalment, only after Natsume Soseki and Tanizaki Jun'ichiro. This suggests that Dazai Osamu and Tanizaki Jun'ichiro enjoy classic status in Japanese literary history and are well-known among the public. An article discussing the revitalising effect of *Bungō sutoreii doggusu* on Japanese literature begins with the line, “Dazai Osamu, Tanizaki Jun'ichiro, and other authors have been transformed into handsome manga characters in the modern fantasy manga *Bungō sutoreii doggusu*, and collaborations with this series are being held in literature museums all over the country” (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 05 Oct 2016). I believe the journalist cited Dazai Osamu and Tanizaki Jun'ichiro as key examples of the literature authors due to how well-known they are; even people who have not read their works would immediately recognise their names and be intrigued enough to continue reading the article. These examples thus show how the *Bungō sutoreii doggusu* collaboration with the Tanizaki Jun'ichiro Memorial Museum did not need another popular author to draw visitors

because the real Tanizaki is well-known and popular enough. In contrast, the Kunikida Doppo and Nakahara Chuya museums benefitted from the inclusion of another popular author and character because the real authors appeal to a more niche readership. Secondly, Dazai Osamu's presence in the illustrations for author-specific museums suggests he is not only popular, but also a guide to the wider world of Japanese literature itself. By including him, the collaborations can attract fans who might be familiar with Dazai Osamu but not with Kunikida Doppo and Nakahara Chuya, but who can learn about the latter two authors once they are in the museums. Dazai thus symbolically functions as a guiding light even as a manga character, an interpretation that I believe is strongly intertwined with the popular interpretation of the real literary-historical figure Dazai Osamu.

I conclude by returning to the proposed simplified version of Darnton's book history model. Throughout Chapters One and Two, I have demonstrated how Dazai Osamu's life and texts go through the three stages of the model. Firstly, he has been read and discussed by scholars, the media, and the fans, and the popular view that emerged of him in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was that of a tragic yet charming person who has empathy for the weak. This popular reading of him affected the way the audience viewed transformative works of him, such as when they criticised the 1967 play "Dazai Osamu no shōgai" for

not including enough of his charm. This criticism of the play in turn feeds back into and emphasises the dominant reading of Dazai Osamu as a charming and tragic writer. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the image of him gradually changed to that of a lively, humorous writer who still has empathy for the weak but is also now a guiding light that encourages strong human connections and community bonding. This is reflected in and complemented by transformative works such as *Bungō sutoreii doggusu*, which depicts Dazai as a playful, lively character who also attracts readers to explore the wider world of Japanese literature. While these two chapters have focused more heavily on stages one and two of the simplified model (the creation of a dominant reading which then feeds into the popular culture works), in the next two chapters I will examine in detail adaptations and transformative works based on Dazai's life and texts and take a closer look at stages two and three (popular culture works are created based on dominant and popular views, which might reinforce existing readings of Dazai Osamu or lead to new readings and discussions of him).

Chapter Three: From Realistically Drawn Failure to Animated Hero—The Transformations of Dazai Osamu in 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Popular Culture

In one version of *Ningen shikkaku*, Oba Yozo inadvertently drives Takeichi to suicide, and Takeichi is reincarnated as Oba's son to haunt him for the rest of his life. In another version, Oba Yozo, a modern-day high-school student, is haunted by the butterfly tattoo on the bar waitress's hand long after her death. In yet another version, the cause of all of Oba's woes is distilled into a single word formed by a flock of birds: *onna* (women).

The adaptations and transformative works of Dazai's life and works are many. Some of them are "faithful" adaptations of the novel and are simply making it more accessible in a different medium; some change the events to varying degrees to add a unique take; and some change the story and even the characterisation entirely to create a new narrative. This chapter explores these 21<sup>st</sup>-century creative re-interpretations of Dazai's life and works. It asks the following linked questions: what were the creative re-interpretations of Dazai Osamu in modern Japanese popular culture? What interpretations of Dazai were they based on? What purpose did these transformative works fulfil?

To answer these questions, I will narrow my scope to adaptations of *Ningen*



*shikkaku* and Dazai's life for the following reasons: firstly, as explored in Chapters One and Two, though more readers have read beyond *Ningen shikkaku* by the 21<sup>st</sup> century, his post-War representative work remains Dazai's most widely-read and discussed novel; secondly, despite the disagreement in the academic realm about whether or not *Ningen shikkaku* is a confessional novel that details Dazai's life (an I-novel), more readers seem to agree that it is an I-novel than otherwise, meaning there is some level of conflation between Oba Yozo the protagonist and Dazai Osamu the author. As Irmela Hijiya-Kirschner, a professor of Japanese literature, argues, "His readers clearly had certain expectations and therefore had a tendency to read *Ningen shikkaku* in the same way [as an I-novel]" (75). As such, analysing popular culture works of not just Dazai's life but *Ningen shikkaku* as well can give us some insight as to how modern creators interpret Dazai Osamu.

This chapter argues the following: while it is impossible to state that all the popular culture works have the same interpretation of Dazai Osamu, we can make a divide between the works created in the 2000s to early-2010s and the works created in the mid- to late-2010s. The former works kept Dazai Osamu's charm, had more variations in artistic style, and showed more of Oba's and Dazai's pathetic nature, particularly towards the end of *Ningen shikkaku's* story. From the mid-2010s onwards, however, Dazai Osamu

was portrayed as a handsome, charming, lively young man whose role is to protect Japanese literature, while the art style across various works generally suited 21<sup>st</sup>-century anime aesthetics and there was much less emphasis on Dazai Osamu as a tragic, decrepit figure.

After a brief summary and analysis of *Ningen shikkaku*, this chapter is structured following loosely the chronological order of the transformative texts, beginning with an examination of EASTPRESS's *Manga de dokuha* series and *Aoi bungaku*, a manga and anime, respectively, that adapted *Ningen shikkaku* for educational purposes. It is followed by an exploration of Furuya Usamaru's and Ito Junji's manga adaptations of *Ningen shikkaku*, both of which were done for commercial and entertainment purposes and changed the plot to a significant extent. I then examine *Bungō sutoreii doggusu* and *Bungō to arukemisuto*, both multimedia franchises, for their portrayals of a lively and handsome Dazai Osamu who plays the role of protector of literature. *Manga de BUNGAJU*'s 2018 *Ningen shikkaku* and Mori Rin's 2021 *Ningen shikkaku* are then examined, with a focus on the difference in tone and messaging compared to the 2000s educational adaptations of *Ningen shikkaku*. Finally, two 2019 movies are analysed: a live-action adaptation of the last three years of Dazai's life, and a sci-fi animation movie based on *Ningen shikkaku*.

### Dazai Osamu's *Ningen shikkaku*: A Brief Summary

On the back of KADOKAWA's 2015 print of *Ningen shikkaku*, the blurb is as follows:

“I have led a life full of shame. I do not have the slightest idea what it means to lead a human life.” In Dazai's representative literary work, he uses letters from Oba Yozo—son of a wealthy Aomori landowner and a drug addict crippled by his abuse of morphine—to elevate his own life, as far as it can go, to the level of art. “I no longer have happiness or unhappiness. Everything simply passes.” (Dazai, *Ningen shikkaku*, KADOKAWA edition, blurb, my translation)

It provides two well-known lines from the novel to hook the readers and, importantly, it suggests that Oba Yozo can be read as a stand-in for Dazai Osamu, except that Oba is more exaggerated for the purposes of art. Unfortunately, if a reader does not know about Dazai Osamu's life, the blurb offers little understanding of the novel or the story within. Here, I would like to offer a brief summary of the structure of the novel and the significant themes so as to provide a base against which the ten adaptations and transformative works can be understood.

In terms of structure, *Ningen shikkaku* is told through three confessional letters by Oba Yozo, tracing his life from when he is a young boy until he turns 27. These

letters are written in the first-person perspective, and they are framed by a foreword and afterword which are also in the first-person perspective. However, the foreword and afterword are from the perspective of the man who reads these letters, with the strong hint that he will convert these letters into a novel for the public. In other words, he is the man who will write *Ningen shikkaku*. Therefore, structurally, the novel suggests that Dazai Osamu is present in several layers. Oba Yozo is his mirror, though it is debatable whether he is a one-to-one reflection of Dazai Osamu or a parodic, distorted reflection. Simultaneously, Dazai Osamu is viewing his life from a more distant perspective; he is the unnamed man who reads the letters and presents them to the public. Finally, he is the author of the novel the readers are holding in their hands. The structure therefore lends itself to multiple readings and conflicting interpretations of Oba Yozo and Dazai Osamu, and further in this chapter I will explore how these various interpretations play out across the popular culture works.

As a child, Oba Yozo learns the importance of reading the people around him, primarily due to his fear of his father's wrath. To avoid his father's displeasure, he learns to answer his father's questions in ways that will please him, and this habit is later extended into Oba trying to please all the people around him. This takes the form of him masking his true feelings and acting the *dōke* (clown) in order to make people

laugh. Only Takeichi, his classmate in elementary school, sees through his act. Oba befriends Takeichi in fear that Takeichi will reveal his secret, and after seeing Oba's art, Takeichi predicts Oba will become an incredible artist. When Oba goes to Tokyo for his university studies, he meets Horiki, who uses Oba's money for drinking and introduces him to the pleasures of sexual relationships with women. Oba's desire to please the people around him means he cannot bring himself to reject Horiki's demands nor the pleas of the women attracted to him. He attempts to escape the pressures of society by committing lovers' suicide with the bar waitress, Tsuneko. However, he fails to die, and this begins his downward spiral. Oba becomes addicted to alcohol and drugs as they are the only way he can create art or find an escape. His brief moments of happiness with Yoshiko, his wife, are destroyed when Yoshiko is raped by another man and she is no longer honest and carefree around Oba. By the end of the third letter, Oba is admitted into an asylum.

Of the themes in the novel, I would like to highlight the theme of an individual attempting to survive in society, or *seken*. *Seken* can mean society or the world, and I argue that it has the connotation of "the judgement of people towards an individual." When Oba is criticized by Horiki for failing to uphold the morals of a human being according to the standards of *seken*, Oba thinks,

Society: what on earth is that? Is that multiple people? Where does society in its physical form exist? Yet, whatever it is, I have lived my whole life thinking of it as a strong, harsh, and terrifying thing, but when Horiki said that about me, I suddenly thought—

“You say society, but don’t you just mean yourself?” (Dazai, *Ningen shikkaku*, KADOKAWA edition, 97, my translation)

Despite Oba’s clarity in this moment—he rightly understands that Horiki is accusing him according to an arbitrary set of rules—he is highly fearful of *seken*, and this fear eventually translates into his insanity and withdrawal from all forms of societal interaction. In Isolde Standish’s examination of the portrayals of masculinity and the tragic hero in Japanese post-War films, he argues that in the move towards an industrial economy, “the individual becomes the agent for his/her subjugation ... this occurs through two interactive forces of control. The first is the establishment of a shared internalized belief system bridging different interest groups ... The second ... is the group or the *seken* (society at large) which I argue forms a spatial configuration of power not unlike the disciplinary schema designed by Jeremy Bentham” (73). Quoting Ikegami’s argument that there is an “imagined community honour” he asserts that the individual is compelled to behave in certainly societally-approved ways to uphold this community honour. Oba Yozo’s fear and resistance against *seken* can be read as an individual’s fight against the unjust and unreasonable expectations and hierarchies of

power that control the individual, who then has to behave in ways contrary to his or her personal feelings and beliefs for the sake of the community. As we shall see in the popular culture works in the following sections, the struggle of the individual within society is explored and highlighted in different ways and, in some cases, subverted.

“Realistic” Educational Bridge: *Manga de dokuha*’s and *Aoi bungaku*’s *Ningen shikkaku*

In 2007, publisher EASTPRESS published a manga adaptation of *Ningen shikkaku* under its *Manga de dokuha* line. As of October 2022, there are 134 titles in this line, which adapts not only literary titles to manga but also non-fiction titles such as *Bushidō* and *Das Kapital* (EASTPRESS, “kankōjun”). The adaptation of *Ningen shikkaku* had its twentieth print by 2018, and in 2020 the updated edition had its first print, which suggests this adaptation has been well-received ever since its first print run. This is the blurb on the inner flap of the book:

**The literary masterpieces are indeed interesting!**

**Providing extensive manga adaptations of famous literary works.**

This series provides extensive manga adaptations that capture the essence of masterpieces, literary curiosities, and controversial texts from East and West. Please enjoy the worlds within these classic works in the accessible “manga” format. We sincerely hope to provide a bridge between readers and literary masters. (*Manga de dokuha*’s *Ningen shikkaku*, inner flap)

As the blurb suggests, the primary aim of East Press's manga adaptations is to "provide a bridge between readers and literary masters" through the "accessible" format of manga. Such manga adaptations are not new: *Manga Shakespeare*, for instance, similarly aims to adapt Shakespeare works for the modern audience in a visually compelling manner (Hayley 268-69). Neither is it an isolated case within Japan: as we will examine later, *Manga de BUNGA KU*, which published its adaptation of *Ningen shikkaku* in 2018, had a similar aim of providing a reader-friendly version of Dazai Osamu's text. As such, before analysing Dazai Osamu as transformed and presented in the manga, it should be noted that the primary purpose of this adaptation is educational in nature and its main aim is to provide a link to the original text. This means that their interpretation of Dazai Osamu might be based more heavily on the novel and its post-War context, rather than on the dominant readings of Dazai Osamu after his death.

Secondly, one basic but important difference between the original *Ningen shikkaku* and the various adaptations that will be discussed in this chapter is the visual element of the adaptations. Unlike the novel, where an understanding of the written word is crucial, Mark MacWilliams notes that "[e]ven if you cannot read the speech balloons in manga or understand the dialogue in anime, you can still get the gist through the sequence of images that advance the story ... [i]n manga, as in anime, it is the flow of images that is



key” (7). To an extent, even if the readers cannot recall the text, the images will aid them in piecing the story together. Importantly, where the original novel suggests what Oba Yozo looks like through a meticulous description of the photos in the foreword but leaves the actual image to the reader's imagination, *Manga de dokuha* presents us with their artistic interpretation of these photos and thus further shapes and reinforces Oba Yozo’s and Dazai Osamu’s image.

Upon opening the book, the inner flap provides a photo of Dazai Osamu, obtained from The Museum of Modern Japanese Literature, as seen below:

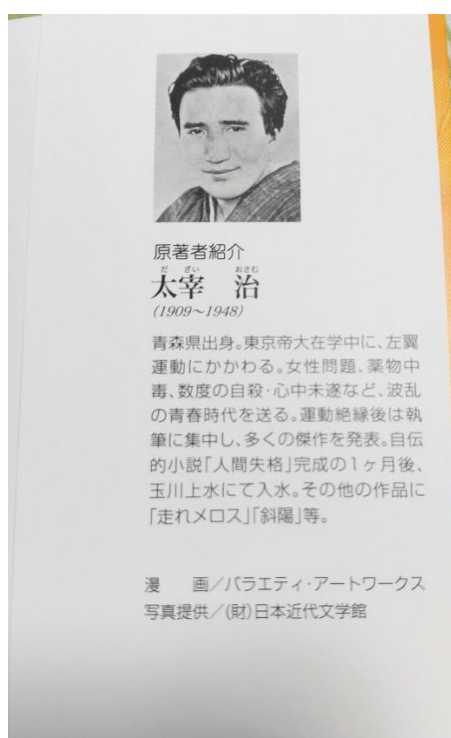


Fig. 11: Inner flap of *Manga de dokuha*'s *Ningen shikkaku*. It briefly introduces Dazai Osamu and includes a photograph of him.  
Source: *Ningen shikkaku* (*Manga de dokuha*).

The inclusion of Dazai Osamu’s photo, provided by an established literary institution, emphasises that this adaptation’s primary goal is education about a real author and an important part of Japanese literary history. Furthermore, immediately after the title page, there is a 2-page spread introducing the key characters of *Ningen shikkaku* as follows:



Fig. 12: Character introduction from *Manga de dokuha*’s *Ningen shikkaku*. There is nearly an entire page for Oba Yozo.

Source: *Ningen shikkaku (Manga de dokuha)*, pp. 2-3.

I believe for EASTPRESS’s *Manga de dokuha* series, it is convention for the author to be introduced on the inner flap before the characters are introduced, and thus it is not logical to expect a one-to-one mirror between author and protagonist for every adaptation. However, taking into account the expectations readers have of *Ningen shikkaku* (that it is an I-novel) as well as the similarities between the real Dazai Osamu in the photo and the

manga Oba Yozo on the character page—both have the same nose, facial proportions, and wide smile—I argue that readers are encouraged to make a close connection between author and character and read Oba’s story as Dazai’s. Secondly, the 2-page spread shows that *Manga de dokuha* is using the *gekiga* (cinematic realism) art style, which originated from “a loosely organized group of teenage artists who were looking to publish serious stories told in a dramatic visual style borrowed from film noir” (Shamoon 27). In *gekiga* works, there is a dedication not only to using cinematic sequences in storytelling but also utilising a realistic style of art. By using a realistic style to tell a serious, heavy story, *Manga de dokuha* further encourages readers to view *Ningen shikkaku* as a real story that happened to a real person.

The story in the manga adaptation does not differ from the novel significantly. However, the medium allows it to offer both an omniscient, “objective” view of Oba Yozo as well as his first-person perspective. For instance, when Oba Yozo becomes a young adult, the artist depicts his body and aura as one that has “the scent of women” and is thus made infinitely attractive to women. While the text in the square boxes are Oba’s own, the art allows us to view him from the outside:



Fig. 13: A page depicting Oba Yozo as a young man who has the scent of women.

Source: *Ningen shikkaku (Manga de dokuha)*, p. 56.

The dramatic swirling lines around him as well as the strong contrast between the dark background and the white lines emphasise his aura in a dramatic fashion. Arguably, the dramatic atmosphere can be attributed to Oba's first-person perspective of himself, meaning he might see himself as powerful and attractive even though other people do not. However, this page not only shows his first-person perspective, but it also depicts his body from an omniscient perspective and creates the impression that Oba is not lying about his attractiveness. He is healthy and able-bodied, and although we do not see his facial features, the glimpse we get of his lips and the reaction of the woman (so attracted

to him she does not realise her book is upside-down) tell the readers Oba is objectively handsome. In this way, the adaptation uses both the first-person and omniscient perspectives to convince readers that Oba Yozo is a charming man.

However, this omniscient style does not only show Oba's attractive side; the artist does not shy away from depicting Oba Yozo in a grotesque manner after he overdoses on drugs and alcohol and is admitted into an asylum:



Fig. 14: A panel near the end of the manga, depicting Oba Yozo before he is admitted into an asylum.

Source: *Ningen shikkaku (Manga de dokuha)*, p. 181.

Decrepit and with missing teeth, the Oba Yozo at the end of the manga adaptation is a

pitiful figure and not particularly attractive, much unlike the handsome boy and young man he is drawn as for the large part of the adaptation. The inversion of colours for the white and the iris of the eyes further emphasises his symbolic “failure in being human.” Physically, Oba Yozo is still human, but the inversions mean he is on the borderline between human and non-human. The almost monstrous appearance can make the readers draw away in fear and disgust; however, I believe that the omniscient storytelling, paired with a gritty, realistic art style, not only emphasises how “real” this story is but also invites sympathy for Dazai Osamu. For instance, the inversion of colours shows that Oba Yozo is physically on the borderline between human and non-human, and it also tells us that, mentally, he is on the borderline between sanity and insanity. This encourages the readers to extend their compassion to Oba Yozo. Furthermore, the manga utilises the first-person perspective to show both Oba Yozo’s feelings about his own attractive aura and the horrors that he and, through him, Dazai Osamu went through.

In the novel, Oba Yozo states that in his childhood, he had a fear of eating in the same room as his family, which he links to his lack of understanding of society and other human beings:

In other words, it seemed I still did not understand the way human beings worked. My view of happiness and other people’s view of happiness did not match, and I carried the unease born from this mismatch; I even tossed

and turned for nights on end, moaning to myself, nearly going mad. ... In other words, I do not understand. (*Ningen shikkaku* 13-14, my translation)

Oba's unhappiness and misery is derived from his difficulty in perceiving other people's emotions and inner thoughts; the line "my view of happiness and other people's view of happiness did not match" suggests he is a people-pleaser, and it is of vital importance to him that he makes other people happy and that he is likeable. However, the surface appearance of other people—their facial expression, their body language, their words—does not necessarily convey to him what their views are and how he can make them happy. The style of the novel gives us an insight into why Oba feels he "do[es] not understand the way human beings worked." All of his feelings and experiences are conveyed to us through his first-person perspective, including meandering thoughts, doubts, fears, and illogical sequences, and he is—presumably—acutely aware of the depths of his own thoughts that he can never adequately convey to other people. In other words, he has the recognition that just as he has inner depths, other people do too, and it troubles him that he can never understand other human beings through their surface appearance. In *Manga de dokuha's* adaptation, Oba's attempt to read other human beings and, ultimately, his failure in doing so takes the form of them having no facial features:

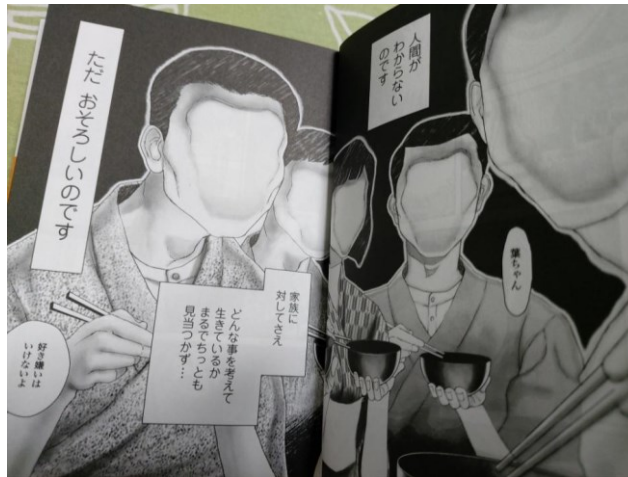


Fig. 15: Oba Yozo's family members during a meal. None of them has facial features.  
Source: *Ningen shikkaku (Manga de dokuha)*, pp. 16-17.

By depicting the people around Oba Yozo without any facial features, the artist accomplishes the following: firstly, the horror and uncertainty within Oba are emphasised, as he cannot plausibly draw any meaningful inference if there are not even any facial features he can read; secondly, Oba is absolved of his wrongdoings or misdeeds, because he cannot be faulted for this lack of information; thirdly, by seeing the horrors of the world through his eyes, the reader is invited to empathise with Oba Yozo. In addition, the people significant to Oba have features, as seen in the 2-page introductory spread. However, after Yoshiko is raped by another man, her features melt away as well right before his eyes:





Fig. 16: Yoshiko's features melt away not long after she is raped by another man.  
Source: *Ningen shikkaku (Manga de dokuha)*, p. 152.

Earlier in the manga adaptation, the contrast between Yoshiko having clear facial features and Oba's family having none suggests Oba Yozo is still capable of forming significant human relationships despite his admitted lack of understanding of other people. However, the loss of Yoshiko's innocence utterly and finally strips away Oba's ability to connect with other human beings. In the page above, we see Oba's immediate reaction to Yoshiko's features melting away. The artist focuses on his eye and all other details are stripped away, the panel rendered in extremely simple lines so we can focus on his stark shock and terror. Over the next two pages, his scream of despair and the tears on his face

after he realises he cannot read Yoshiko anymore tell us he mourns this loss; they also suggest that he has genuinely tried to integrate himself into human society but failed not through any fault of his own. Therefore, the effort on his part and his devastating defeat, illustrated through the facial features (and lack thereof) of the people around him, invites the readers to sympathise with Oba Yozo.

By depicting Oba Yozo in a realistic *gekiga* style and showing his aged and pitiful figure at the end, the manga adaptation matches the pathetic quality of the Oba Yozo we see in the novel and less so the dominant interpretation that emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century of Dazai Osamu as a tragic but charming writer. Simultaneously, its first-person perspective shows Oba's view of the world, particularly by removing or distorting the facial features of those around Oba, which encourages readers to feel pity for the protagonist. I believe this portrayal is sympathetic to Dazai Osamu without overly appealing to a particular dominant reading. Above all, it appears to be realistically depicting the events of Oba's and Dazai's lives to fulfil its function as an educational bridge, making the original novel more accessible now that readers have images to guide them.

For the second part of this section, I examine the anime series *Aoi bungaku* which, like *Manga de dokuha*, aims to deliver classic works to the audience in an accessible way.

Izawa Eri argues that anime gives an insight into the “Japanese soul” as it is the perfect storytelling medium that offers escapism for its audience:

[I]t is an ideal story-telling mechanism, able to combine graphic art, prose, characterization, cinematography techniques (even in the manga), and a variety of literary narrative techniques. ... Drawn characters and worlds can depict fantastic and otherwise impossible scenes, making the stories and images “safe” for exploration ... the anime-based media provide an ideal path for escapism, and hence a look at what people are seeking at a deep, personal level that the “real world” cannot touch. (139-40)

While Izawa’s argument focuses on an idealised vision of anime, without considering the commercial aspect of it, her argument that anime combines several storytelling techniques and delivers “impossible scenes” in an easily accessible and comprehensible way is useful in this examination of *Aoi bungaku*’s *Ningen shikkaku*, which shows us Oba’s inner world in fantastical and imaginative ways and thus invites the viewer to understand and empathise with his sufferings.

*Aoi bungaku* began broadcasting in 2009, the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Dazai’s birth, and *Ningen shikkaku* is the first literary work in the series. The other works are Sakaguchi Ango’s “Sakura no mori no mankai no shita” (Under the Forest of Cherry Blossoms in Full Bloom), Natsume Soseki’s *Kokoro* (*Kokoro*), Dazai Osamu’s “Hashire Merosu,” and Akutagawa Ryunosuke’s “Kumo no ito” (“The Spider’s Thread”) and “Jigoku hen” (“Hell Screen”) (*NTV*). The lineup comprises authors and works the audience would

recognise from *kokugo* lessons, and thus the audience would logically associate these stories with adjectives such as “classic” or “important.” In addition, *Ningen shikkaku* being the first in the series strongly connotes that it is a popular, well-read, and well-loved text. If the first episode and first story is not attractive, it is highly unlikely the audience will continue to watch the series; thus, the sequence of adaptations in this series acknowledges and reinforces Dazai Osamu’s importance in both the literary and popular culture spheres.

However, in case the audience needs further guidance on how important these works are and what they mean, the anime series also has a narrator, voice actor Sakai Masato, who introduces the author, text, and themes prior to each episode, and he always finishes his introduction with a note that “they are evergreen because they are masterpieces” (*Aoi bungaku*, ep. 1), suggesting that these works and by extension this anime series are worthy of eternal remembrance due to the quality of the writing. To hammer home the point, Sakai is surrounded by books in every introduction, which tells the audience that Sakai’s messages are “legitimate” or “correct” because they are based on extensive reading. In addition, the presence of the books tells the audience that they are absorbing important intellectual information by watching this series.

The use of a narrator functions similarly to Dazai Osamu's photograph in the inner flap of the *Manga de dokuha* manga adaptation: his presence suggests the anime series is doing a faithful rendition of the original text. He functions like a *benshi*, a narrator whose explanation accompanied early 20<sup>th</sup>-century silent films. As noted by Aaron Gerow, the *benshi*'s explanation was not free of critical commentary and its role is inseparable from the development of early film criticism (14-15). In this respect, having a narrator endows the animation with authority by suggesting that it has been endorsed and deemed intelligent, intellectual, or worthwhile by a critical commentator. Of particular interest is the fact that he teaches the audience how to understand the work best: for instance, at the beginning of episode 2, he speaks of Dazai's suicide after the completion of *Ningen shikkaku* and compares a real photo of Dazai as a child to the photo of Oba as a child and notes the similarity. This encourages the audience to view *Ningen shikkaku* as an autobiographical text, and because it is the educated and intelligent *benshi* who tells them so, the 20<sup>th</sup>-century dominant interpretation that Oba Yozo and Dazai Osamu are equivalent is thus reinforced.

The anime adaptation does not make changes to the events of the novel, and while colour, sound, and music add some vibrancy for audience enjoyment, the heaviness of the novel is maintained. Here, I would like to focus in particular on the use of colours.

Through the eyes of *Aoi bungaku*'s Oba Yozo, the world is often shown in dull or oversaturated shades, and the constant flip between these two extremes (dull *or* oversaturated, with very little in between) suggests he has only two experiences of life: the surreal and the grim. He is often shrouded in the heavy, grey-black darkness of night, within which shapes and objects are indistinct. When there are oversaturated colours in the anime, they tend to represent a cheerful but disturbed mind full of hallucinatory details induced by alcohol and drugs. When the dark and oversaturated colours are blended, they suggest that Oba's reality *is* the hallucinatory.

The best example to illustrate the breakdown between reality and fantasy is Oba's inner demon, which takes the form of the distorted, pencil-scribbled, shadowy figure he drew in his youth. The shadowy demon is a dark void which reveals nothing and conceals everything, and it is meant to stir fear and unease just as the grimy shadows of night invite uncertainty. However, in the final scene of the fourth episode, there is a sense of warmth as Oba and the inner demon sit face to face, their surroundings depicted in oversaturated shades of red, pink, and orange (*Aoi bungaku*, ep. 4). Prior to this scene, in all four episodes, the inner demon is a threatening figure looming at the corners, haunting Oba, alternately becoming larger than Oba's surroundings then shrinking to being child- or adult-sized. Just like the lack of facial features on people in *Manga de dokuha*'s

adaptation, the demon represents how Oba Yozo sees the world, a presence we objectively and realistically cannot observe but that is made possible through the storytelling medium of manga or anime. However, when Oba accepts that he has become a failure of a human being and sits with the demon in the oversaturated warm colours, the suggestion is strong that Oba Yozo has made peace with the demon and accepted that reality and his hallucinations are one, and the welcoming warmth of the oversaturated colours even suggests there is a certain contentment in becoming a “failure of a human being.”

*Aoi bungaku* thus interprets the novel in both conventional and new ways: firstly, Oba Yozo fails in plenty of aspects as a person in society, but he is ultimately worthy of pity and compassion due to the constant presence of his inner demon. However, secondly, while there are tragic elements in the ending, the warmth and peace in the final scene questions whether we should struggle against becoming a failed human being and suggests that perhaps accepting that we have our darkneses and failures is more human than denying them. Thirdly, and in support of the above point, *Aoi bungaku*'s Oba Yozo does not lose any of his attractiveness by the time he enters the mental asylum. Instead, he has a delicate fragility, and his sharp jawline, generous hair, and thin body—attractive features according to anime conventions—suggest Oba Yozo continues to be handsome

even in his deteriorated state. This is the complete opposite of Oba Yozo at the end of *Manga de dokuha*'s adaptation; *Aoi bungaku* suggests there is still beauty even if one has "failed." While *Manga de dokuha* invites our pity for Oba because of his tragic state, *Aoi bungaku* invites audience sympathy in a different way, by appealing to the human bias for beauty. It is, after all, difficult to condemn somebody if one feels they are aesthetically pleasing. The use of disquieting instrumental music throughout the episodes, which can heighten the audience's sense of unease, also tells us that the world through Oba Yozo's eyes is an unsettling, terrifying place. In addition, there is a mournful tune full of pathos at the closing scene. The tune is fitting for grand stories where the individual struggles against a force much more powerful than himself or herself, and it tells the audience that we should grieve for Oba Yozo instead of condemning him, because he is ultimately a beautiful downtrodden figure against whom society has been unjust and cruel.

Thus, whether intentional or otherwise, the anime adaptation agrees with the 20<sup>th</sup>-century dominant reading of Dazai Osamu as tragic and charming. Instead of a failed human being whose grotesque appearance reflects the destroyed mentality within him, in *Aoi bungaku* we have a beautiful man whose fragile beauty encourages not only compassion but also makes the audience question whether he has really "failed." Hence, while still faithful to and based heavily on the novel, *Aoi bungaku* presents Dazai Osamu



as a man with worth and beauty who has been destroyed by the pressures of society and still finds a way to make peace with himself and his version of reality.

### Different Stories for a Different Time: Furuya Usamaru's and Ito Junji's *Ningen shikkaku*

In the preceding section, I studied educational adaptations of *Ningen shikkaku* in the late-2000s and argue that they reinforce the dominant view of Oba's story being equivalent to Dazai's life and reinforce the 20<sup>th</sup>-century interpretation of Dazai as a tragic, charming man who deserves our sympathy. In this section, I will analyse two very different adaptations of *Ningen shikkaku* that were made for commercial entertainment.

The first work is Furuya Usamaru's adaptation of *Ningen shikkaku*. He published the first volume of *Ningen shikkaku* in 2009 and its third, final volume in 2011, a work that began in Dazai's centennial year and that was finished just before the *ōtōki* memorial of 2011. In his adaptation, Oba Yozo is a modern high-school student in Tokyo, and his letters take the form of online journal entries that Furuya himself comes across and investigates. In other words, Furuya plays the role of the man who reads Oba's letters in the foreword and afterword of the original novel. In Furuya's afterword to the final volume of *Ningen shikkaku*, he states,

I also first read Dazai Osamu during my high school years.

*Ningen shikkaku*.

This work resonated deeply with me in a time when my vague unease about the future grew stronger. [I thought] perhaps I will lead a life like Yozo's. When I saw similarities between myself and Yozo, I thought of myself as a failed human being as well, and I even indulged in those thoughts. Yozo, who is so attractive to women, was my dark hero, and I saw beauty in Yozo's destructive lifestyle. Dazai Osamu was a genius at appealing to adolescent hearts. ...

In the end, I gave some salvation to Yozo by bringing him to a plane [of existence] that held no pain. But the novel *Ningen shikkaku* can only toss readers into a pit of despair and devastation. ...

If you read this manga and felt no salvation in it, I invite you to read the novel. The despair I couldn't bring myself to depict can be found there, a true despair the author sacrificed himself to write. (Vol. 3, pp. 222-23)

As Furuya does not divulge any other information as to why he created an adaptation of *Ningen shikkaku*, we can only conclude from his afterword that *Ningen shikkaku* affected him personally and heavily, to the extent that he wanted to create his version. Half a decade after his version of *Ningen shikkaku* was completed, the famous horror manga artist Ito Junji's version was published by Shogakukan from 2017 to 2018, and this is the second adaptation I will be analysing in this section. In an interview with *Anime News Network*, when asked about why he created a manga adaptation of *Ningen shikkaku*, Ito answered as follows:

In Japan, a company called Shogakukan releases that manga [*Ningen*

*shikkaku*]. For this kind of industry, it's important to have a connection with the editor. In the past, I worked with this editor for a young reader's magazine, and they later moved into a magazine targeted towards older adults and reached out to me about a new project. Most of the time I would be working on something for younger readers and a *Josei* (young adult women) female audience, but this magazine was more towards middle aged men. I was thinking that a surreal story might not be as exciting to the readers, so I thought a classical literature story from Japan would fit better. The editor listed out the titles for me, and *No Longer Human* from Osamu Dazai popped out, which I hadn't read it [sic] before. After reading it, I could feel sympathy with the main characters, much like in my stories. (Chik)

As compared to Furuya, Ito had less personal knowledge of Dazai's most famous work, and the selection of this text for adaptation was primarily so it could appeal to the magazine's target audience, middle-aged men. Despite his belief that "a surreal story might not be as exciting to the readers," his adaptation contains plenty of surreal horror elements, which suggests his selection of *Ningen shikkaku* was due to the target audience's familiarity with it as well as the fact that it is suitably adult. The two authors had different motives before they began to create the series, and in this section I examine the changes they have made to the story and the characters and argue that unlike the "realistic" educational adaptations in the previous section, as these transformative works were commercial in nature, the authors deliberately made changes to the story and characters in order to appeal to a modern audience and they thus contributed different takes on Dazai Osamu.

Upon opening the first volume of Furuya's work, one is greeted with his version of Oba Yozo:



Fig. 17: Oba Yozo, the first page of Furuya Usamaru's *Ningen shikkaku*.  
Source: *Ningen shikkaku* (Furuya), vol. 1, p. 1.

Because of the jacket, the reader knows this is Oba Yozo envisioned as a high-school student in modern times. He looks like any typical Japanese high-school student, and for some readers, this can make *Ningen shikkaku* (or, specifically, this adaptation of *Ningen shikkaku*) more accessible. There is a stronger possibility that readers will resonate with Oba's story because his experiences are relatable in the shared contemporary context.

Secondly, he is cradling a human skull, commonly a symbol of death, and he is surrounded by wilting plants, another symbol of death. However, the heaviness of the death and despair are evened out by Oba's smile and his features; Oba is an attractive young man, and the way he is framed by the plants only emphasises how his beauty is worth preserving just as artwork is. This depiction is in line with how Furuya "saw beauty in Yozo's destructive lifestyle." Furuya's Oba and *Aoi bungaku's* Oba are similarly beautiful and, due to this beauty, it is likely that readers are inclined to forgive his mistakes.

While it is uncertain whether Furuya intends it, he further invites sympathy for Oba in a series of symbolic pieces of artwork. Just as in the original novel, Furuya's Oba acts as a clown in order to please people and to be well-liked. However, Furuya suggests it is not entirely Oba's fault that he was driven to hide his true feelings:



Fig. 18: A 2-page spread that depicts Oba as a puppet with missing puzzle pieces.

Source: *Ningen shikkaku* (Furuya), vol. 1, ch. 1, pp. 18-19.

With completely blackened eyes and the limbs and body of a puppet, Furuya's Oba physically lacks human aspects. This adds weight to the line, "I have lived as a clown for 17 years," because Oba has been playing a role for so long he might as well be a puppet and not a human being with his own thoughts and feelings. The idea of Oba lacking humanity is similar to the approach of *Manga de dokuha* when the artist drew the white and iris of Oba's eyes having inverted colours. However, unlike *Manga de dokuha*, Furuya's adaptation emphasises how Oba seems to have no control over his loss of humanity. While Oba is participating in the Japanese Communist Party activities, he sinks into thoughts of what his father is like, following which is a series of flashbacks where the readers see how much influence Oba's father has over him. When Oba's thoughts return to the present, we see the following panel:



Fig. 19: Oba Yozo as a puppet. He is framed by a crumbled slab of wall, with a backdrop of fraying curtains.

Source: *Ningen shikkaku* (Furuya), vol. 1, ch. 2, p. 70.

We cannot see who is holding and controlling the strings that hold Oba upright, but the storytelling sequence strongly suggests that Oba Yozo is a clown, a puppet, or that he lacks humanity because of the control his father has over him. In addition, the fraying curtain creates the impression of hell flames that he is suffering through, and the crumbling wall completes the piece by framing him like he is a piece of artwork under somebody else's hand. While all the elements that complete this picture are grounded in reality, the final product looks like a deliberately constructed piece of artifice. Furuya's

Oba Yozo might look like someone who exists in modern times, but he is ultimately a creation with layer upon layer of symbols and artificiality: he is a puppet with puzzle pieces that can be placed or removed by another hand, he is a puppet whose strings are still under his father's control, he is a piece of artwork.

This can have a distancing effect upon the reader and make us feel Oba is removed from reality. However, Furuya simultaneously grounds the narrative in a modern reality. For instance, Oba Yozo goes to high school in Tokyo, with the epitome of high school life captured in the following page:



Fig. 20: A page with Oba's classmates arranged in rows like that of a high school photobook. Instead of names, all of them are labelled "futsū" (normal).

Source: *Ningen shikkaku* (Furuya), vol. 1, ch. 1, p. 35.



While the names are all replaced with “futsū” (normal), the layout of the photos suggests this is a page from a high school book and that Oba did live a typical high school life like many other typical Japanese readers. The students all have distinctively different features, but Oba’s labelling of his classmates as “normal” does suggest he has formed only superficial relationships, such that he does not remember any of them by name. However, his inner monologue that “putting up an act—of being considerate to friends—so that one can be likeable is the correct answer” suggests he does not disparage “normality” and is simply trying to be like them. He believes he falls short and fails to be “normal,” but that suggests he had made a sincere effort to integrate himself into society. Thus, Furuya has attempted a balance between depicting Oba as an artificial puppet and Oba as a person who sincerely tried and failed, and I believe both depictions intertwine to elicit sympathy from the readers.

Until this point, I have focused on Furuya’s depiction of Oba Yozo and how his interpretation invites sympathy through his contrast between symbolic art and scenes grounded in reality. In addition, I argue that Furuya places emphasis on one character to an extent the novel does not: the bar waitress Oba Yozo attempts his first lovers’ suicide with. In Dazai’s novel, the bar waitress’s name is Tsuneko; in Furuya’s version, the bar

waitress is nicknamed Ageha, and her most distinctive feature is the butterfly tattoo on the back of her right hand. The Japanese word *ageha* refers to the swallowtail butterfly, and the tattoo on her hand reinforces the symbolism of her name. While her appearance, way of dressing, and personality are not particularly distinct, because of the association with the butterfly, the bar waitress has a much stronger, distinctive presence in Furuya's *Ningen shikkaku*. She functions not just as a character but also as a symbol, representing both the desire for freedom and the potential of transformation and metamorphosis.



Fig. 21: Ageha makes the butterfly tattoo fly while she and Oba are on the train to Kamakura.

Source: *Ningen shikkaku* (Furuya), vol. 1, ch. 4, p. 152.

While on the train to Kamakura to commit lovers' suicide, Ageha shows Oba how she

likes to make the tattoo butterfly fly through the air. In the natural world, the butterfly is a free creature able to go anywhere it wishes. As a tattoo, the butterfly is “trapped” on Ageha’s body and is able to fly only when Ageha lifts her arm and moves her hand through the air. In other words, the tattoo butterfly and Ageha are similar in nature, both of them bound to something that restricts their freedom. For the tattoo butterfly, it is Ageha. For Ageha, it is the restraints and difficulties that living in a society brings. Ageha, her tattoo butterfly, and her desire for freedom must have made an impact on Oba, such that he remembers her long after he failed to die in their lovers’ suicide. For instance, in the page below, Oba copies her movement of making the butterfly fly, suggesting he is seeking the freedom that Ageha once sought as well.



Fig. 22: Oba mimics Ageha’s action of making the butterfly fly.

Source: *Ningen shikkaku* (Furuya), vol. 2, ch. 6, p. 52.

When Oba makes the invisible butterfly on his hand flies, he reflects that he can no longer remember what Ageha looks like. However, he later sees her image in other women, such as the bar madam. This suggests strongly that he has not truly forgotten her and she has been etched deep into his mind.

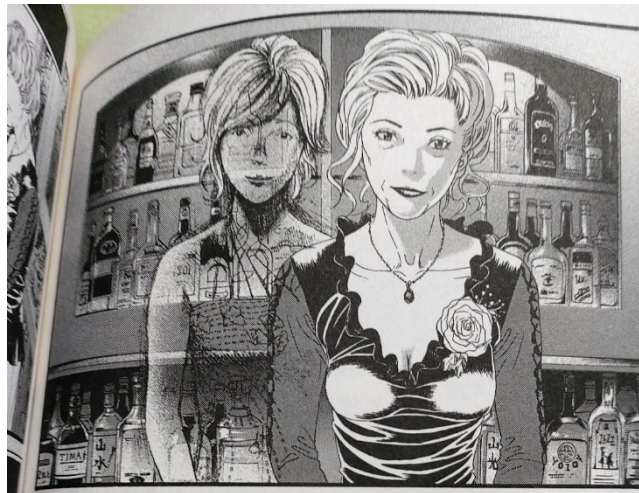


Fig. 23: Oba sees Ageha's shadow in the bar's madam.  
Source: *Ningen shikkaku* (Furuya), vol. 2, ch. 7, p. 112.

Finally, towards the end of the story, in the depths of Oba's hallucinatory despair, he clings onto their lovers' suicide in Kamakura as his last salvation, as seen in the below page:



Fig. 24: In Oba's hallucination, he escapes to the Kamakura beach where he has a one-sided conversation with Ageha.

Source: *Ningen shikkaku* (Furuya), vol. 3, ch. 12, p. 180.

In his hallucination, Ageha has been changed and deformed by death. Her eyes and mouth are open in an expression of terror and despair, a complete contrast to her light, cheerful expression when she made the butterfly fly on the train. Ageha has gone through transformation just as Oba has. However, what does not change is her raised arm, the action she took to make the butterfly fly. Despite their changed and sorrier states, she still represents freedom to him, and despite Oba's state of despair, seeing her helps him briefly

regain his grip on reality and sanity.

On one level, Ageha's importance to Oba is symbolic, as the butterfly symbolises freedom and change, and Oba not only desires an escape from society but also undergoes countless metamorphoses throughout the course of the story, often for the worse. On another level, his devotion to Ageha's memory suggests Oba is not a callous person and that he, in fact, has the capacity for love and long-lasting emotion. In effect, Furuya has both elevated Oba to the status of art as well as humanised him by placing such a strong emphasis on a woman Oba loves, compared to Oba in the novel who seemingly moves on after her death.

Finally, Furuya also suggests that the modern Tokyo city is a contributing factor in Oba's eventual insanity. When Oba can no longer return to his home because he is being searched for by the Japanese Communist Party, he wanders the city in the rain, the following 2-page spread emphasising how vast and impersonal the city is:



Fig. 25: A 2-page spread with the Tokyo Tower near the centrefold, suggesting the vastness of the city Oba is wandering through.

Source: *Ningen shikkaku* (Furuya), vol. 1, ch. 3, pp. 104-05.

After wandering through the rain, he finds shelter in the bar where Ageha serves him, which therefore suggests Oba clung to the warmth and humanity Ageha provided in the midst of an impersonal city and further explains why he is so devoted to her. Unfortunately for Oba, the pressure of the cityscape does not ease. At the end of the story and in the depths of his crazed hallucination, he sees *ningen shikkaku* (failure as a human being) all over the signboards of the city, as follows:



Fig. 26: Oba sees *ningen shikkaku* in different fonts and sizes on the signboards all across the city.

Source: *Ningen shikkaku* (Furuya), vol. 3, ch. 12, 198-99.

The layout and arrangement of the signboards parallel that of any busy, central Tokyo location, such as Shibuya or Shinjuku. The limited space in the cityscape means the signboards and buildings are densely clustered together, which creates a claustrophobic, oppressive feeling. However, to make matters worse for Oba, even though the phrase is presented in different font type and sizes and the signboards are placed on different buildings and floors, meaning they belong to different companies and brands, at this point they are all condemning him as a failed human being. This suggests there is no chance of escape; the entire city and society have joined hands to deliver the same damning message to him.

While this is Oba's imagination, the fact that his "failure as a human being" takes



the form of the impersonal city landscape suggests there are concrete factors beyond his control that have caused his deterioration. The city as an oppressive enemy is a core motif in Dazai's *Ningen shikkaku*, as literature specialist Sasaki Keiichi has argued:

Needless to say, the post-War Tokyo that Dazai published *Ningen shikkaku* in and the Tokyo forty years later have incomparably changed in landscape and development. However, there has not been much change in the functions of a city and how the individual experiences those functions. People living within a culture of disposability eventually think, "I will be disposed of." That is the ruthlessness of the city, and that is its function. (199-200)

Oba Yozo, who attempted to live in the impersonal city, is thus finally deemed unworthy and disposable, crushed, and disposed of. In the end, he is found by the character of the author, Furuya, in a rubbish heap. Furuya, not recognising that that is the person he has been investigating after he read all of Oba's journal entries, ignores him and walks away, treating him exactly as rubbish is treated by passers-by, driving home the message that the city is a merciless and crushing place for the suffering individual.

While I personally do not see salvation in Furuya's work (Oba in the final page does mutter about moving into the next plane of existence, but we do not actually see him without pain or suffering), I would argue that Furuya has humanised Oba Yozo and made him even more sympathetic to the readers, which would greatly appeal to readers who view Dazai Osamu as a tragic writer who put his life into his works. Furthermore, the

twist at the end—that Furuya meets Oba but does not recognise him—suggests Oba Yozo and, through him, Dazai Osamu, are present in our modern society and should never be treated as disposable. He is eternally alive, which is an idea that plays off of and builds on the dominant narrative that Dazai’s works are the “The Eternal Literature for Youth.”

In comparison to Furuya, Ito Junji depicts a much less sympathetic Oba Yozo in his version of *Ningen shikkaku*. Like *Manga de dokuha*, Ito’s style is realistic, even veering into the grotesque several times. Ito appears to be interested in detailing the horrors of Oba’s inner mind, intertwined with his sexual exploits with women. The result is a story that loosely follows the plot of the original novel but that makes several significant changes in characterisation and story. The message that Oba gets what he deserves is threaded through all three volumes, and it is an adaptation that dramatises the novel for a type of cathartic *schadenfreude* (pleasure derived from another person’s misfortune).

The most major change is Oba’s characterisation. In previously discussed adaptations, as well as the original novel, while Oba has his failings, he does not intend deliberate harm to the people in his life. In comparison, Ito’s Oba is still an attractive young man, but his Oba is far more malicious, self-preserving, and calculating. For

example, he maliciously lies to Takeichi that a woman, Secchan, likes him when she actually does not. Takeichi believes him and tries to confess to her, and her rejection and disgust eventually cause Takeichi to commit suicide (Fig. 29). In another example, Oba knowingly has sexual and romantic relationships with the sisters in the boarding house, Anesa and Secchan, without informing either of them, and eventually Secchan kills Anessa out of jealousy and hatred. At Kamakura, Oba pushes Tsuneko off the cliff instead of committing lovers' suicide with her. While Oba in all versions of *Ningen shikkaku* has relationships with several women, Ito's Oba shows the least guilt among them.



Fig. 27: Takeichi commits suicide. This departs significantly from the novel.

Source: *Ningen shikkaku* (Ito), vol. 1, ch. 3, p. 64.

To satisfy the readers' desire for justice and retribution, Ito shows the punishments Oba endures as well, suggesting a Buddhist element of karma that determines Oba's life, in contrast to Furuya's work, which strongly suggests Oba's actions are not entirely under his own control. Furthermore, Oba finds religious salvation in the embrace of a woman, her body appearing saintly and his thoughts taking the form of a Buddhist chant.



Fig. 28: The body of the prostitute appears saintly to Oba Yozo. His inner thoughts take the form of a religious chant.

Source: *Ningen shikkaku* (Ito), vol. 1, ch. 4, p. 110.

This suggests that Buddhism and its laws have a strong presence in Ito's interpretation of *Ningen shikkaku*, which supports the idea that any harm Oba does will come back to him as karmic retribution. For instance, when Secchan gives birth to her and Oba's son, the son looks exactly like Takeichi (Fig. 29). The suggestion is strong that Takeichi continues to haunt Oba, the person who lied to him and indirectly caused Takeichi's suicide, by now

being reincarnated as his son.



Fig. 29: Oba and Secchan's child looks exactly like Takeichi.

Source: *Ningen shikkaku* (Ito), vol. 1, ch. 3, p. 92.

Furthermore, Secchan is sent to an asylum after murdering Anesa and giving birth to her son. However, Oba is not able to escape from her obsessive love, because he is sent to the same asylum at the end of the story. Secchan and their son, the reincarnation of Takeichi, find Oba again, and Oba lives the rest of his life bound to them. The horrors in Oba's life are thus, to a significant extent, self-inflicted. For the previously discussed adaptations, the readers and audience can feel sympathy for Oba because his sufferings and despair are partially caused by human society, which we understand can be difficult to navigate.

However, Oba in this adaptation is treated exactly as he deserves; for every one of his wrongdoings, there is a commensurate punishment and nothing more.

There are two things Ito does which gives Oba Yozo redeeming points: firstly, Oba's father has a strong presence in Oba's life and thus Oba's behaviour is at least partially a result of the complex relationship between him and his father. Unlike the novel, where Oba's father is physically absent after Oba goes to Tokyo, in Ito's version Oba's father visits their home—uninvited—after Oba and Yoshiko are married.

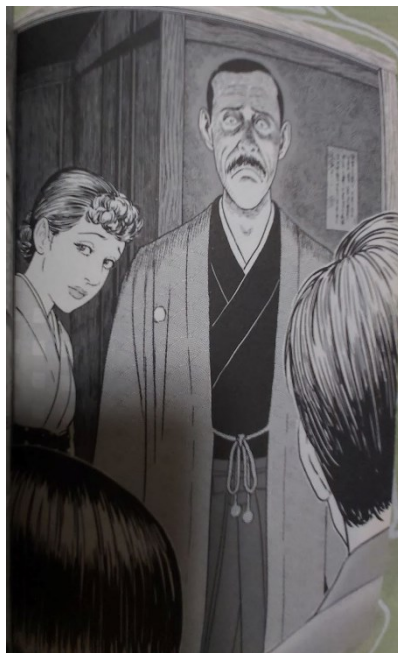


Fig. 30: Oba's father visits Oba and Yoshiko. While he later disappears mysteriously, the fact that people other than Oba can see him suggests he was physically present.

Source: *Ningen shikkaku* (Ito), vol. 2, ch. 11, p. 66.

Oba's father is a deeply unpleasant man with unsmiling features, and during the period of

time when he stays with Oba and Yoshiko, he makes several demands of them and criticises everything they do. The pressures he inflicted on Oba in his childhood thus follow him into adulthood in a very real and physical way; Oba cannot escape even after he has found happiness with Yoshiko. Even after Oba's father accepts Yoshiko and makes a plea to her to support Oba, the relationship between father and son is not fully repaired. Oba's father disappears but in place he leaves a short sword, an aggressive symbol of attack. The short sword is later used by Oba to destroy the paintings he had made, which suggests Oba's father has never truly disappeared; he is still a presence that destroys Oba's potential for creation and life. Thus, the pressures Oba's father inflicts on Oba as well as his aggressive, destructive nature helps the reader feel some sympathy for Oba.

Secondly, in one of Oba's hallucinatory dreams, he finds himself symbolically suffocated by the women in his life and the demands they make of him, to the point that he destroys himself trying to please all of them:



Fig. 31: In Oba's hallucination, he is engulfed by and tormented by the women in his life.  
Source: *Ningen shikkaku* (Ito), vol. 2, ch. 15, p. 165.

The women are making personal demands of him that conflict with one another, and while Oba has been malicious and unkind to several of them, he is also a people-pleaser. In this case, the suggestion is strong that it is impossible for him to satisfy all of them, and even after his explanation, none of them gives up on demanding his sole attention. The sheer number of them and how he is trapped in the middle further emphasises his helplessness and how they are suffocating presences in his life. I believe that this version of Oba has done malicious deeds which warrant their condemnation, but arguably, their



persistence and demands can perhaps lighten the reader's criticism.

While I do not believe Ito's version of Oba Yozo can elicit sympathy as easily as Furuya's or *Aoi bungaku*'s, I would argue that Ito's transformative imagination of *Ningen shikkaku* in the horror genre makes the text relatable to an audience in the 2010s. In Rajyashree Pandey's examination of horror manga and anime, such as those of Hino Hideshi, she argues the following:

These horror manga draw on narratives from Japan's past, which envisage the world of nonhumans as being not radically different from our own. ... The ultimate redemption of *gaki* [hungry ghosts] in these scrolls is assured with the appearance of the compassionate Buddha, who has vowed to save all creatures. ... The indeterminacy (sic) of the self, the universe that is not centered around humans, the view of life and death as a series of metamorphoses, and the narratives that resist closure are all informed by a Buddhist sensibility. They are also emblematic of postmodern culture. (227-35)

Ito's interpretation of *Ningen shikkaku* is full of the grotesque, including worms emerging from mouths, a room full of people with insect eyes and antennas, and Oba's drawings that portray a woman as half-worm, half-human. While his work is not the same as Hino's, which centres on the non-human animal, the fluid combinations of the human and the non-human in Ito's work and the moments of salvation through the Buddhist scriptures suggest it is also a product of postmodern culture, per Pandey's argument. If the erasure between the boundaries of human and non-human and the lack of a central logic to the

story are two key elements of postmodernism—Ito does appear to be experimenting with how far he can push the boundaries of logical storytelling—and if Japan is a site of the postmodern, as Pandey argues, then Ito's version of *Ningen shikkaku* should be palatable and acceptable to an audience in the late 2010s.

However, Ito makes one distinction and boundary very clear: Oba is very similar to Dazai Osamu, but they are two individual beings in his interpretation. At the beginning of the manga, we are misled by its opening. The story begins with Dazai Osamu and Yamazaki Tomie on the banks of the Tamagawa River, and as they are washed away by the river current, the next page is the beginning of Oba Yozo's first letter. Furthermore, Dazai Osamu and Oba Yozo look extremely alike, which seems to further emphasise that they are the same person. Yet, when Oba is admitted into the asylum, he comes face to face with Dazai Osamu, and he even assures Dazai that he is a writer whose name will be recorded in history:



Fig. 32: Dazai Osamu and Oba Yozo, who look alike, have a conversation in the asylum.  
 Source: *Ningen shikkaku* (Ito), vol. 3, ch. 23, p. 162.

Ito gives a playful spin to the Dazai-Oba conflation: while he draws them as so alike each other that they could be twins, he nonetheless separates them and even shows Dazai and Oba striking up a friendship. Dazai later completes *Ningen shikkaku* based on what Oba shared with him, but by then Oba has become too insane to understand him, and Dazai has no choice but to say goodbye to his friend. Finally, to further emphasise that Dazai and Oba are separate beings, at the end of the story Oba watches his son fly a kite made out of newspaper clippings, and the newspaper used in the kite is a report on Dazai's lovers'

suicide:

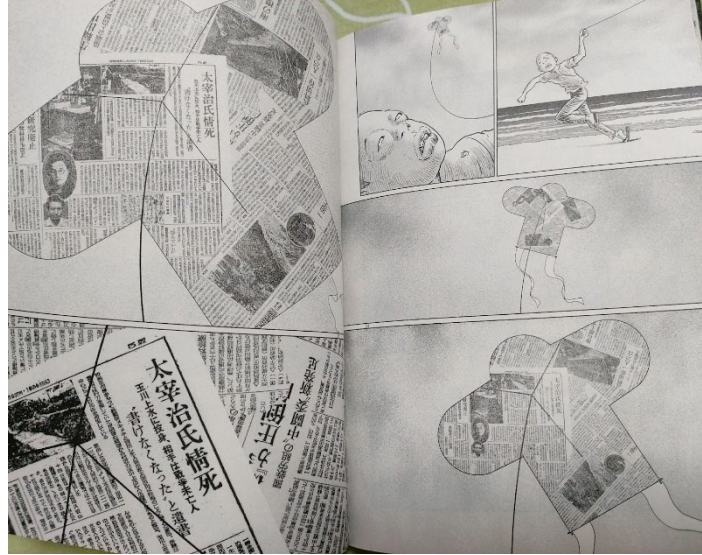


Fig. 33: Oba's son flies a kite. The central newspaper clipping used is a report on Dazai's death.

Source: *Ningen shikkaku* (Ito), vol. 3, ch. 24, p. 203.

Dazai has therefore passed away by this point of Ito's adaptation, but Oba continues to live. By separating Oba and Dazai clearly, Ito thus suggests that the irredeemable Oba in his work is not a reflection on Dazai's character. Dazai is, in fact, a kind friend to Oba and somebody who remembers the debt he owes Oba, as he shows Oba his book after he finishes it instead of immediately committing suicide after its completion as he had in reality. Ito's interpretation of Dazai has more in common with the 21<sup>st</sup>-century dominant reading of Dazai than the 20<sup>th</sup>-century's, suggesting that Dazai is a mentor figure and that he has a personality beyond that of his tragic post-War representative work. While it is

difficult to know if Ito was following the new dominant and popular reading, his interpretation of Dazai, if not that of Oba, concurs with it.

Charming and Humorous Guardians of Literature: *Bungō sutoreii doggusu*'s and *Bungō to arukemisuto*'s Dazai Osamu

The above sections examined the varied adaptive and transformative works of *Ningen shikkaku* and paid particular attention to how the authors portrayed Oba Yozo, the extent to which they elicited sympathy for him, and whether they agreed with dominant interpretations and readings of Dazai Osamu. However, those arguments are based on the premise that we can read Oba Yozo as a stand-in for Dazai Osamu, and, in Ito Junji's case, we have to read the protagonist and Dazai Osamu separately. In this section, I analyse two transformative works that feature Dazai Osamu and not Oba Yozo as a character, and I argue that they reflect the shift in the dominant interpretation of Dazai Osamu from tragic post-War writer to lively, humorous guiding light and guardian of literature.

The first work is *Bungō sutoreii doggusu*, written by Asagiri Kafka and illustrated by Harukawa 35. *Bungō sutoreii doggusu* first began as a manga series in 2012 and has since been expanded into a multi-media franchise with a series of light novels, an

anime adaptation, a movie, several stage plays based on the manga and novels, and at least three spin-offs. The main character of the franchise is Nakajima Atsushi, who has the ability to turn into a massive white tiger. All of the characters are named after authors and have abilities based on the real authors' works. The title of Tanizaki Jun'ichiro's *Sasameyuki* (Light Snow), in *Bungō sutoreii doggusu*, allows the character to create illusions and disappear from view, a nod to the "light snow" in the title which covers objects and people; Miyazawa Kenji's "Ame ni mo makezu," a poem about standing strong in the face of difficulties, gives the character superhuman strength; Dazai Osamu's *Ningen shikkaku* allows him to nullify the powers of anyone he has physical contact with, because of the symbolic "loss" or "failure" Oba experiences in the original text. The series is set in modern Yokohama, with the Japanese authors divided into three agencies: the Detective Agency that investigates unusual activities and helps to protect the peace, Port Mafia that rules over the illicit activities in the city, and the Special Abilities Department in the government that controls and guides the characters with special abilities (in other words, all the characters named after authors).

As briefly discussed in Chapter Two, *Bungō sutoreii doggusu* is part of the wave of historical fantasy and anthropomorphic works that became popular from the mid-2000s. These works transform recognisable and popular historical figures, items, or

concepts into manga, anime, and game characters, with sufficient similarity and overlap in personality between the real figures and the animanga characters so that the audience are familiar with them and can enjoy the transformative work. In the case of *Hakuōki*, it is Shinsengumi characters; for *Axis Powers Hetalia*, it is countries. For *Bungō sutoreii doggusu*, it is authors and their texts. There are thus two premises to take into account before analysing Dazai as he is transformed in *Bungō sutoreii doggusu*. Firstly, for the series to be commercially successful, the barrier of entry needs to be low; in other words, the audience can be drawn to the series because of their familiarity with the names, but they are not expected to be knowledgeable.

With the exception of Yumeno Kyusaku, all of the Japanese authors [in *Bungō sutoreii doggusu*] are included in the 2013 high school *kokugo* textbooks, either in the list of works sorted by chronological order or in the compendium. ... The mid-2010s works with “historical figures” rely on the “network” of “shared knowledge” in order to craft their stories. (Iikura 33-34)

In other words, these are classic Japanese writers who are already well-known due to the readers’ “shared knowledge” from their high school *kokugo* lessons. Dazai Osamu does not necessarily receive unique treatment in this context; he is one of the many classic authors Asagiri uses to create the story, and the market success of the series is dependent not on any specialised knowledge concerning Dazai but a more general knowledge of a

wide range of Japanese authors. Furthermore, even without an understanding of the authors, the manga has its own unique plot and action scenes that the reader can appreciate without literary knowledge. Secondly, the author created the series with the full awareness that this work is *not* reflective of the real authors but a homage-parody for the audience's enjoyment. In a 2014 interview with Asagiri and Harukawa, when they were asked how the characters were born, Asagiri answered,

I first researched each author and their texts, then focused on a specific part of their personality and thought, "What if that personality were to walk around the city..." For example, Dazai Osamu the character is certainly not the real person (*laughs*). I only exaggerated the fact that he failed to commit suicide several times and created a young man who is a maniac about suicide. The premise is that they must be interesting for a manga; I transformed them on the basis of respect for the literary masters. Just like how human beings have many sides to them, I create the character based on the shadow that is formed when a light shines on them. (*Hon no hikidashi*)

When analysing Dazai as he is transformed in this work, it is thus crucial to note that the characters are exaggerated in one way or another for the purposes of commercial entertainment, such as the fact that he is a "maniac for suicide" because that is more interesting for the manga. That said, as argued in Chapter Two, I believe the character Dazai still receives exceptional attention due to the enduring popularity of the author he is based on, and thus it is worthwhile to consider the role Dazai plays in this transformative



text and how his character draws from and contributes to the popular understanding of him.

The series opens with Nakajima Atsushi saving a drowning man; the man turns out to be Dazai Osamu, who has once again attempted to commit suicide. This marks the tone for the rest of the series; the comedic moments are of Dazai's failed attempts at suicide, ranging from the typical (drowning in a river) to the absurd (getting trapped in a giant dustbin). Unlike his suicide attempts in reality or Oba's attempts in *Ningen shikkaku*, all of which are taken seriously, *Bungō sutoreii doggusu*'s Dazai is cheerful and flippant about the consequences of committing suicide, and the people around him adopt the same attitude. At worst, they are annoyed that Dazai is not doing his work because he is trying to commit suicide once again. On one level, this is an uncomplicated parody for the sake of delighting readers who are aware of the real Dazai's life and enjoy the references; on another, this parody contributes to Dazai's changed image. Gone is the Dazai who led a tragic life and died a tragic, romantic death; the Dazai who cannot die and who represents eternal life, symbolic of how his name and works have an eternal place in the cultural imagination, is here to stay. Furthermore, considering manga Dazai's intellect, he should be able to die easily if he wants to. *Bungō sutoreii doggusu*' depiction of his numerous failed suicides therefore suggests that Dazai does not truly want to die, which once again

weakens the tragic post-War image and strengthens the dominant interpretation of him as a contemporary guiding light.



Fig. 34: Dazai Osamu recovers quickly from his drowning attempt and introduces himself to Nakajima Atsushi.

Source: *Bungō sutoreii doggusu*, vol. 1, ch. 1, p. 14.

As seen in the above image, despite his drowning attempt Dazai appears none the worse for wear, and he introduces himself with a charming smile to Nakajima. The charming image of Dazai only continues to improve as the story progresses. He saves the day with his wit and foresight, he has connections to powerful and important characters such as Natsume Soseki, and he is admired by not only Nakajima but also Akutagawa Ryunosuke, who is depicted as his former protege. The latter relationship between character Dazai and character Akutagawa, in particular, is a parody of our reality in which

Dazai heavily admired Akutagawa, and by reversing the relationship such that it is character Akutagawa who seeks character Dazai's approval, it tempers or even erases Dazai's 20<sup>th</sup>-century image; he is no longer the pathetic figure who deserves our pity and is instead the popular and charismatic writer whom other writers seek attention from. In addition, he is the character who dispenses wisdom:



Fig. 35: Dazai gives Nakajima advice to not succumb to self-pity.

Source: *Bungō sutorei doggusu*, vol. 7, ch. 25, p. 39

In the above scene, Dazai advises Nakajima as a *senpai* (senior in the school or workforce), which suggests the advice comes from his own personal experience of having once succumbed to self-pity. While this tells us that character Dazai is not entirely removed from the tragic, depressed Dazai of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it also shows he was able to

move past his failures and depression to become a more forward-looking person. Furthermore, the *sutoreii doggusu* (stray dogs) part of the title is explained by Dazai when he encourages another detective agency member by telling her they are all “dogs struggling in the mud” and none of them is alone in the journey of finding a way forward (vol. 9, ch. 36, pp. 92-93). Dazai is not only dispensing wisdom to another character, but he is also enlightening the readers about the title’s meaning. The image of character Dazai as a wise and kind teacher bolsters the 21<sup>st</sup>-century effort by official agents to change Dazai’s image into a guiding light: he is not a failed human being who wallows in his failures anymore but a person who can help others.

Importantly, character Dazai takes on a role that the Obas or Dazais in the above discussed works do not: the guardian of literature. In the series, there is a mysterious blank “book” that several powerful forces are looking for. According to Dazai in one of the light novels, “there is one and only one “book” in the world. It is a literature book with blank pages, and anything written in it will become reality” (*BEAST* 192). In the manga series, the “book” functions exactly as Dazai describes: reality is changed according to the writer’s wishes, and the detective agency has to find a way to change reality back to the way it was. Of particular interest to me is the term Dazai uses for the “book”: *bungaku-sho* (literature book). Books are termed literature because of, presumably, the

quality of the stories already printed inside them. However, this “book” is empty, meaning it is a book that will *potentially* become literature. In other words, as long as one carries out the act of writing in this “book,” it is considered literature, and one is considered a literary writer. In fact, writing in the “book” is such a powerful act that it changes reality. This is a reflection of reality where every single text that is produced adds knowledge to the world and therefore changes it, however small or large the change is. This “book” is thus a symbol of several concepts: writing, literature, potential, and the power of creation. Among the characters, Dazai is the only one with full knowledge of how the “book” works, he protects and hides the “book” from malicious forces, and he can choose who to impart knowledge of the “book” to. This further elevates Dazai’s position in the series to a fount of knowledge and, importantly, the guardian of literature and creation.

Finally, we can deduce that Dazai is privileged by the author and artist simply from the depth of his background story. Nakajima Atsushi is the protagonist, but the first two light novels are not about him. The first is about Dazai’s entrance examination to the detective agency, and the second is about Dazai’s past in the Port Mafia. The third light novel is a combination of a general story and Edogawa Ranpo’s backstory, and the protagonist does not actually appear until the fourth light novel. In the bonus light novels

distributed to audience members who watched the *Bungō sutoreii doggusu* movie in 2018, one is about Dazai and Nakahara, and the other is about Nakajima and Akutagawa. In other words, out of six light novels, Dazai is the protagonist in three of them. In addition, the first promotional poster for the movie has only Dazai and Nakahara on it, but the movie's focus is Nakajima's past. Logically, as the protagonist of not just the movie but also the manga series and the franchise as a whole, Nakajima should have been on the first promotional poster, yet Dazai is highlighted in the novels, manga, and movie as though he is the protagonist. While I cannot conclusively say that the creators' personal favourite is Dazai, I believe the franchise's team is responding to market demand, as the character Dazai is popular among fans. The real Dazai's popularity could have led to the character Dazai's popularity, and the privileging of character Dazai further reinforces the real Dazai's importance and popularity in a positive feedback loop.

Dazai Osamu in *Bungō sutoreii doggusu* is not the first popular culture representation of the real author, but he is arguably the most important version for the “new” image of Dazai as he is not only charming, humorous, and charismatic, but also a positive force and guiding light for literature. In the second part of this section, I will continue to explore the image of Dazai as a guardian of literature in the multimedia franchise *Bungō to arukemisuto* and argue that it takes a step further by portraying Dazai

as a protector of the “correct” approach to literature.

*Bungō to arukemisuto* was released by DMM Games in 2016 as a desktop game and in 2017 as a mobile game. It is a *gacha* (blind-box style vending machine) game where players collect their favourite characters through completing events and participating in *gacha* spins using the virtual currency they have either earned through the events or spent real money to purchase. The franchise has since produced an anime series, manga anthologies, and stage plays. In the game, there is no overarching plot; authors are reborn into a library as pretty boys or beautiful young men, and the primary goal of the player is to act as both a librarian and an alchemist. *Bungō to arukemisuto*, as the name suggests, is therefore not only about the author-characters but also their interaction with the player (hence literary master *and* alchemist), suggesting that the player is actively involved in the protecting and archiving of literature.

The player-librarian-alchemist collects author-characters, upgrades the author-character’s clothes by performing “alchemy” (using items gained in the game on the author-characters), places them into teams, and sends the teams into texts to remove the stains. It is unclear as to why the stains form and what exactly they mean; the player is only informed that “if the stains consume the book, that literary work will disappear from

people’s minds,” as per the below screenshot:



Fig. 36: The library chief informs the player, who takes on the role of librarian, that his or her job is to cleanse the stained texts.

Source: *Bungō to arukemisuto*.

The anime adaptation gives more precise information about the stains: they are formed when there are negative emotions towards literature. However, the “negative emotions” often take the form of “incorrect interpretations.” For instance, the stains in “Hashire Merosu” are the result of readers interpreting its core theme as “betrayal,” and when the author-characters destroy the stains, the text regains the “correct” themes of “faith” and “friendship” (*Bungō to arukemisuto: shinpan no haguruma*, ep. 1). The first episode of the anime adaptation ends with a note on the importance of literature in our lives, which supports the idea that the series is encouraging a positive attitude towards literature.

However, I argue that the story also sends the subtle message that there is a correct way to



interpret each literary work, and throughout both the game and the anime, the players and viewers learn about the “real” personalities of the authors, gain insight into the relationships of the real authors, and learn the right way to interpret the texts. Dazai Osamu and the entire cast of authors are therefore guardians of literature and “correct” interpretation.

In this game, Dazai Osamu is a young man with brilliant red hair, outlandish clothing, and a loud, vibrant personality:



Fig. 37: The character profile of Dazai Osamu.  
Source: *Bungō to arukemisuto*.

According to the description, “he is a lively mood maker and, at heart, a narcissist that loves himself above all as well as an attention-seeker. He often criticises other people as though he is in a superior position, but he can switch personas quickly to become coy and

charming. He never admits it if someone else points out his flaws. He pays attention to fashion even in areas that cannot be seen by other people and is satisfied even if the beautiful pattern is hidden in his coat.” There are aspects in the personality that can be easily traced to the real Dazai, such as his attention to fashion and his narcissism. Similarly, there are aspects that one can see in his works, such as “lively mood maker,” concurring with Oba Yozo acting the clown in *Ningen shikkaku* in order to please other people. These traits are drawn, as far as possible, from the “real” Dazai Osamu and his texts, and, whether by purpose or coincidence, they agree with the 21<sup>st</sup>-century dominant interpretation of Dazai Osamu as a lively, humorous person. Unlike *Bungō sutoreii doggusu*’s Dazai, who is elegant in his dressing style but not ostentatious, the predominantly red colour scheme of *Bungō to arukemisuto*’s Dazai draws the eye and emphasises how lively and vivacious he is. The result is a character based on information from reality but who looks nothing like the real Dazai Osamu, a pretty boy designed to please players who enjoy modern anime aesthetics where characters have vibrant hair colours and beautiful but impractical clothes.

The exaggerated vivaciousness is seen in Dazai’s speech and actions. He speaks loudly and with excitement, forgoing polite speech in favour of rougher casual language. He unabashedly admires Akutagawa Ryunosuke and is unafraid of speaking his mind

with his friends, Oda Sakunosuke and Sakaguchi Ango, as well as his nemesis Nakahara Chuya. He uses a scythe, a flashy tool heavily associated with the grim reaper and death, but he turns the symbol of death into a symbol of life instead as he uses it to remove stains from texts and keep them alive in the player's mind.



Fig. 38: In the trailer for the game, Dazai shows clear admiration of Akutagawa by staring at him with bright eyes.

Source: DMM Games Official Channel,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=67F4m9I2JQ8>.



Fig. 39: Dazai uses his scythe to destroy the stain. He has a grin and his speech is rough,

casual, and emphatic.

Source: *Bungō to arukemisuto*.

In addition, as though to drive home that the vivacious Dazai is the real Dazai, just as Ito had done, *Bungō to arukemisuto* consciously dissociates Dazai Osamu the person from Oba Yozo the character. During the special *Ningen shikkaku* game event, Sakaguchi Ango, Oda Sakunosuke, and Nakahara Chuya discuss the text and its relation to Dazai. As they converse, Sakaguchi Ango makes the observation that Oba Yozo is “exactly like” Dazai, as per the below screenshot:

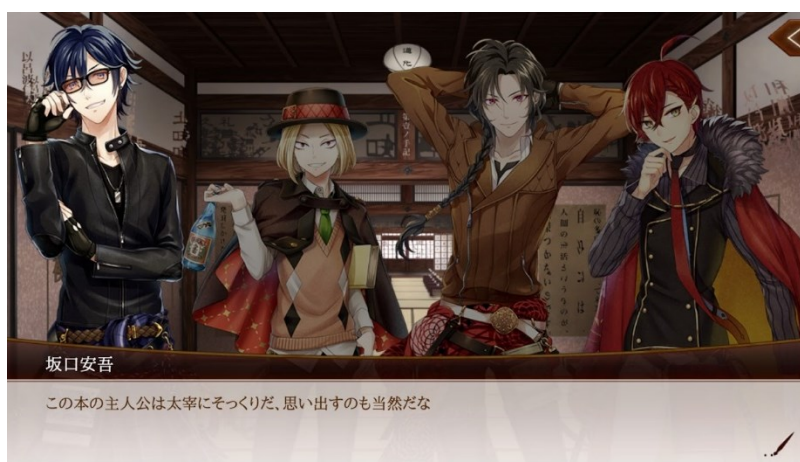


Fig. 40: Sakaguchi Ango says he remembers *Ningen shikkaku* because the protagonist is exactly like Dazai.

Source: *Bungō to arukemisuto*.

At first glance, this appears to agree with the 20<sup>th</sup>-century dominant interpretation of Dazai Osamu as a tragic person as well as the I-novel approach, which treats Oba Yozo as

a direct reflection of Dazai Osamu. However, Sakaguchi’s phrasing, “exactly like,” suggests there are startling similarities but Oba Yozo is not equivalent to Dazai. As the conversation continues, Sakaguchi states that “every author uses himself or herself as the base when writing, but only Dazai was able to make himself so interesting and create a piece of literature worth reading.”

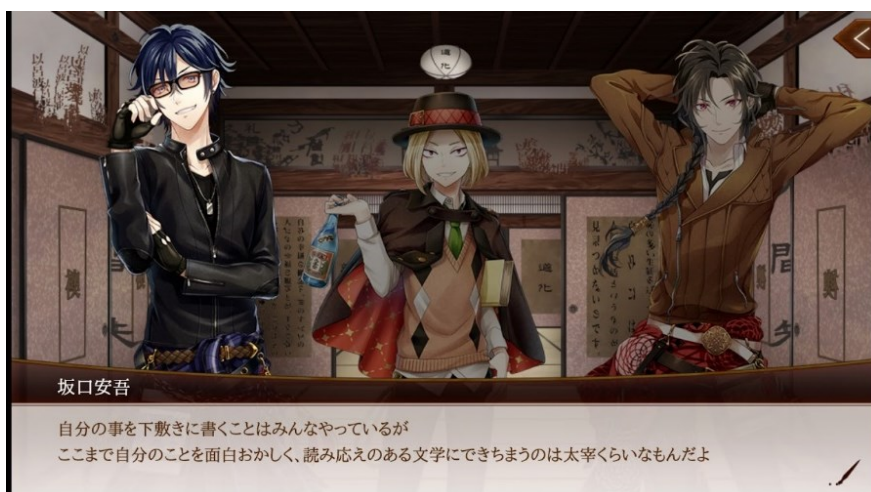


Fig. 41: Sakaguchi Anko emphasises that *Ningen shikkaku* is a creative work of literature, not a reflection of Dazai Osamu’s personality and life.

His phrasing suggests Dazai was actively “making” a character more interesting than the author is for the sake of art; while there is a level of the author himself involved, as he is the “base,” the character is still an artistic creation. Sakaguchi’s understanding of the text and the author is further supported by Dazai himself. Firstly, when the author-characters enter the text, Dazai says he does not remember what the story is about. If the novel were

based on his own life, what Dazai says would not make sense; it is difficult to imagine that he had forgotten everything that happened to him. This suggests Dazai treats the text as a piece of art that is separate from his own life. Secondly, when he destroys the stain, he makes a further distinction between himself and the text. The stain in *Ningen shikkaku* states that “you keep changing your masks, you are a pathetic man,” and the unclear “you” suggests it is referring to both Dazai and Oba as they are the same person. However, when Dazai cleans the stain, he declares he will not allow the stain to use his hard work as it wishes (Fig. 39), which supports the following ideas: *Ningen shikkaku* is his “work,” not himself; the stain’s interpretation is wrong, which means the “correct” interpretation is that Dazai and Oba are separate people or that Dazai has a personality of his own and is not wearing and shedding personas; lastly, the 21<sup>st</sup>-century dominant interpretation—that Dazai Osamu is more lively and outgoing than his most tragic and depressing work suggests—is correct.

Dazai Osamu in this game therefore supports and reinforces the new, recent interpretation of him, and the game also suggests he protects literature and insists on not only a positive approach to literature, but also the “correct” interpretation of it. It is a pedantic and restricted approach to literature, and this is the key difference between *Bungō to arukemisuto*’s Dazai and *Bungō sutoreii doggusu*’s Dazai Osamu, as the latter

protects literature but does not dictate how we should approach it. While I disagree with the pedantic approach, I believe the attitude to literature in these works (both series believe that literature should be protected) is responding to the *hon-banare* (not reading books) trend among young people, which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter Four.

In summary, the game is not only designed to appeal to young women who enjoy collecting aesthetically pleasing characters, but it is also meant to encourage players to read literature and interpret it the way it is meant to be, though the success of this message cannot be gauged. As I played the game, I felt that the enjoyment of the game is dependent on the player's existing level of knowledge of literature. For example, there are several references to Ozaki Koyo's disciples and how fond he is of Izumi Kyoka. However, these conversations are unlocked only if certain author-characters are placed in the same team and sent to complete the mission. If the players do not know about the real authors and their relationships, they would not know how to team them up in the first place. In addition, the interactions between characters contain inside jokes that are not explained to the players, on the assumption that they already know them. In other words, there is no guidance for a player who might not know some of these authors or their relationships—the game is designed to be enjoyed by people who already love the literature, in which case it is doubtful whether it can fulfill the function of encouraging

people who do not know the literature to read it.

Before concluding this section, I note that unlike *Bungō sutoreii doggusu*, where Dazai receives special treatment even if Asagiri and Harukawa do not consciously intend it, Dazai Osamu is not privileged above other authors in the game. All the author-characters are presented as attractive men, with different designs according to their personalities. For instance, Natsume Soseki is a gentleman dressed in the British style and with a moustache, while Tanizaki Jun'ichiro is a long-haired beauty in a kimono and with a masochistic streak. Secondly, the game allows the player to freely choose and team authors, and Dazai is only one choice among many. If Dazai is the player's personal favourite, he will naturally be privileged, but it is not a given that all players will pay particular attention to Dazai. Thus, Dazai in this game does contribute to the 21<sup>st</sup>-century image of Dazai as a lively and humorous man, but he ultimately plays the role as one of the many guardians of literature, not *the* sole guardian.

From Culturally Odourless to Cultural Refinement: *Manga de BUNGAJU*'s and Mori

Rin's *Ningen shikkaku*

In the above section, I examined two Dazai Osamu characters in two series that



reimagine authors as manga or game characters and argued that they agree with and reinforce the 21<sup>st</sup>-century dominant interpretation of Dazai, with the additional point that he is a guardian of literature. As the wave of historical fantasies and anthropomorphic works continues to gain strength, new educational adaptations continue to be circulated, and this time there is a noticeable difference in art style and tone between the late-2010s adaptations and those from the late-2000s. In this section, I discuss two of the newer adaptations, *Manga de BUNGA KU*'s and Mori Rin's, and I argue that there is a tension between these interpretations in terms of the distinctiveness of Dazai's character and the extent of his mark on culture.

*Manga de BUNGA KU* began publishing its adaptations of literary works in 2018. Of note, *Ningen shikkaku* was chosen as the first work for adaptation, suggesting its place of importance in the literary scene as well as the fact that the classic work continues to have market appeal. Like *Manga de dokuha*, *Manga de BUNGA KU*'s aim is to make the classic literary works accessible and enjoyable to the readers. The editors state that aim clearly in the foreword of the manga:

When you hear the term “Japanese literature,” what adjectives immediately come to mind? There must be many who think of it as “formal” or “difficult to read” ...

These works have been read and appreciated by many over the course of

several decades, and we hope more people can enjoy these works that are representative of Japan. However, it is difficult for people to begin reading them as they are.

Our solution is to “manga-fy” them.

Manga is a form of entertainment that has supported Japanese literature as well as Japan. In manga, everything is presented in images, which allows the reader to visualise the story easily. ...

We focused on making the manga for the “modern reader.” In addition, we edited it so that the charm of this long, classic literary work can be felt by today’s young readers. ...

Even after you finish the manga, please challenge yourself by reading the original novel. You might also prefer to read it while comparing the text to the manga. We hope you can dive deep into the text and enjoy its world.

We sincerely hope this series will help more people read and enjoy Japanese literature. (2-3)

Just as MacWilliams argues, and this team of editors agree, the images that are vital to the manga medium aid readers in visualising and remembering the story and thus make literary works more accessible. Of particular interest is how the team put special effort into making the adaptation appeal to the “modern reader.” I argue that this is done not through the story but through the art style. Unlike *Manga de dokuha*’s or Ito’s adaptations, which use a realistic style, *Manga de BUNGAJU*’s art style looks and feels “odourless”; there is no particular feature that makes Oba Yozo or any other character distinct. The odourless art style means there is limited barrier to entry, making the manga inoffensive and easy to consume but also creating a bland image of Dazai.

Like *Manga de dokuha*, *Manga de BUNGA KU* is an educational bridge to the original text; as seen in the foreword, it hopes readers will “challenge [themselves] by reading the original novel” (3). It thus introduces the author to the readers first by including a write-up in the inner flap, as well as a photo of Dazai Osamu:

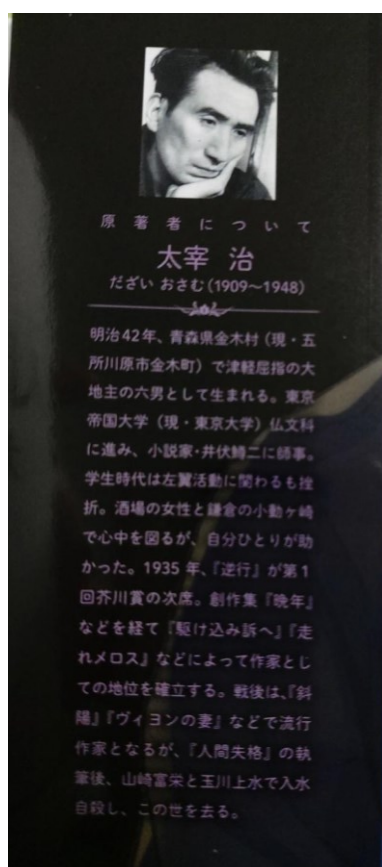


Fig. 42: The inner flap with an introduction of Dazai Osamu. The photo is Dazai in his classic brooding pose.

Source: *Ningen shikkaku* (*Manga de BUNGA KU*).

The photo is immediately recognisable as it is one of Dazai Osamu’s most famous photos, where he rests his cheek on a hand. The likelihood is high that even readers who have not

read Dazai's works will recognise the photo, therefore making the manga adaptation and *Ningen shikkaku* even more accessible to them. In addition, unlike *Manga de dokuha's* cover, which is a collage of images from the manga, *Manga de BUNGA KU* chose a manga replication of Dazai's brooding photo for its cover, as shown below:



Fig. 43: The cover of *Manga de BUNGA KU's Ningen shikkaku* is a manga version of Dazai Osamu in his brooding pose.  
Source: *Ningen shikkaku* (Manga de BUNGA KU).

By replicating this photo, *Manga de BUNGA KU* therefore sends the message that their adaptation is not only drawn according to modern manga conventions, making it easy to consume, but it is also faithful to the original.

However, the pose is where the similarity between the real Dazai on the inner flap and the manga Dazai on the cover ends. The manga Dazai is a *biseinen* (beautiful

young man), drawn to appeal to young women. Manga Dazai has thinner cheeks, a sharper jawline, expressive glistening eyes, thinner eyebrows, and a fuller head of hair. The inclusion of Dazai Osamu’s real photo “legitimises” the adaptation by showing the team paid attention to reality and did an accurate replication of him, but this is very much a Dazai Osamu that follows the aesthetic conventions of modern anime and manga. This art style is used for all the characters in the manga, as can be seen from the character introduction:



Fig. 44: The character introduction in a 2-page spread.  
 Source: *Ningen shikkaku (Manga de BUNGAKU)*, pp. 4-5.

Unlike the *Manga de dokuha* character introduction spread, where each character is distinct from the other even within the same style, the *Manga de BUNGAKU* characters have similar face shapes, sharp jawlines, and no particularly distinct markers of difference except the hairstyle. This is especially evident when examining the women, all

of whom have the same face shape. In other words, the adaptation follows the conventions of the Japanese Visual Language (JVL). Neil Cohn argues that in JVL,

people are commonly drawn in a recognizable pattern—the stereotypical big eyes, big hair, small mouth, and pointed chins of characters in manga. ... This predominant manga “style” maintains both conventionality and iconicity, and represents patterns no less cognitive than any other linguistic form. The iconicity makes it accessible and easily decodable to individuals across the globe, while its conventionality reflects that its patterns are shared by many “visual speakers.” (188-89)

Because this adaptation is designed for the modern reader, it is fitting that the team chose a style that they can easily read and understand as per convention; this is an adaptation that speaks a language the modern reader, who has grown up watching anime and reading manga, understands. The benefit is that they will not be distracted from the story because they can immediately adapt to the art style, but arguably the despair of the text is softened by the clean, non-distinct art.

The adaptation does utilise symbolic art, similar to previously discussed manga adaptations, to portray Oba’s perspective of the world and elicit sympathy from the readers. For instance, Oba believes he has to adopt a persona to survive in society, and this belief is illustrated through the wearing of masks:



experiences between reader and character. I believe the team intends for the reader to interpret it the second way; however, compared to the manga adaptations discussed in previous sections, the symbolic art to illustrate Oba's perspective is limited in *Manga de BUNGA KU*, which prioritises the omniscient style. While this has the effect of portraying "reality," it can restrict the reader's access to his view of the world, and the reader has to primarily rely on Oba's inner thoughts expressed in the text boxes. Therefore, after considering both the use of the masks and the omniscient style, I cannot conclusively state that this adaptation successfully elicits sympathy.

In addition, the art style softens all the strong emotions, such that the reader is not invited to feel deeply for the character. Towards the end of the story, when Oba deems himself a "failed human being" and is admitted into the asylum, the scenes of despair are primarily conveyed through the darkness and shadows of the cell. However, Oba notably does not lose any of his attractive features.





Fig. 46: Oba is admitted into an asylum and deems himself a “failed human being.”  
Source: *Ningen shikkaku* (*Manga de BUNGA KU*), p. 149.

In the above page, Oba stands despondently in the middle of his cell, his shadow stretching before him, and his eyes are devoid of light. There are cracks in the wall, and the cell is starkly empty and devoid of any sign of life. The adaptation thus adequately illustrates Oba’s depression through the art as well as his inner thoughts in the text boxes. However, if compared to Furuya’s adaptation, where the words *ningen shikkaku* are oppressively and suffocatingly splashed across the city signboards, or *Manga de dokuha*, where Oba appears nearly non-human due to the inverted colours of the white and iris of the eyes, the despair in *Manga de BUNGA KU*’s version is considerably tamer. Even at the

very end, when Oba is supposed to appear much older than his actual age, he is not much changed except for his white hair and exhausted eyes:



Fig. 47: At the end of the story, Oba Yozo has white hair and dull, exhausted eyes.

Source: *Ningen shikkaku (Manga de BUNGA KU)*, p. 155.

Similar to *Aoi bungaku*'s adaptation, *Manga de BUNGA KU* presents an Oba Yozo who does not appear excessively aged; his features remain that of the attractive young man he had been. In other words, Oba Yozo remains eternally aesthetically attractive, almost too perfect. Just as I argued regarding *Aoi bungaku*'s Oba, I believe this makes it difficult for readers to be unsympathetic. Who would blame a beautiful young man for his failings, particularly when society is partially responsible for them? However, I believe the art

style ultimately makes Oba's emotions as well as Dazai's image bland; with a conventional, odourless art style, the story and its message risks being quickly forgotten.

In Azuma Hiroki's seminal *OTAKU: Japan's Database Animals*, he discusses the otaku's consumption of products that are created from a "database." In particular, he uses the example of novel games with characters that "most efficiently reflects the otaku's passion toward *moe*-elements [elements that draw their empathy]" (76). In summary, popular culture now consists of a database of *moe*-elements, and creators choose from this database and combine the elements to create characters who appeal to the audience, but who are virtually indistinguishable from one another. For example, they might choose round sparkling eyes, hair tied in twin ponytails, and cat ears for a female character so that she appeals to consumers who enjoy these specific *moe*-elements. *Manga de BUNGAKE*'s characters are precisely a combination of *moe*-elements that we can see in multiple other games, anime, and manga; Oba Yozo is handsome but in an indistinct way, with a hairstyle and eye shape that make him generally aesthetically pleasing to young female readers. While this means Dazai's image of despair and tragedy has been tempered and his work effortlessly integrated into 21<sup>st</sup>-century popular culture, it does not particularly reinforce his new lively, humorous image either. Ultimately, in art style as well as structure, *Manga de BUNGAKE* serves as an inoffensive educational bridge

between the original work and the adaptation. Furthermore, throughout the manga there are short write-ups after each chapter to educate readers about Dazai Osamu and *Ningen shikkaku*, and its afterword urges readers to revisit the original work. In addition, writer Okuma Shoya, who wrote the afterword, notes that reading the story in an objective, third-person point of view allows the reader an easier entry point to the text, as compared to his own middle school years when he took no less than three days to finish reading the novel (158-59). *Manga de BUNGA KU* removes us from the confused and fearful depths of Oba's first-person perspective, and with this distance perhaps the story is easier to consume. To that end, *Manga de BUNGA KU* succeeded in lowering the barrier to entry to the original novel, both through the easily consumed art as well as the tempering and diluting of strong emotions. A fresh view or interpretation of Oba Yozo or Dazai Osamu is not their aim: accessibility is.

The final manga adaptation examined in this chapter is Mori Rin's 2021 version. Due to the lack of an afterword or foreword and Mori being new to the manga industry, it is difficult to conclusively state what her goal is in her adaptation. She graduated from the Joshibi University of Art and Design with a specialisation in Western painting, and her background shows in her artistic interpretation of *Ningen shikkaku*. There are several panels drawn in the style of conventional Western painting or with Western art symbolism,

and I argue that her aim is the opposite of *Manga de BUNGAJU*'s. Where *Manga de BUNGAJU* presents a culturally odourless and inoffensive adaptation, Mori emphasises the cultural and artistic heritage *Ningen shikkaku* is. She presents Oba Yozo and, through him, Dazai Osamu as martyrs for art, elevating their position and reinforcing Dazai's distinctive and eternal presence in the cultural imagination.



Fig. 48: The cover of Mori Rin's adaptation.  
Source: *Ningen shikkaku* (Mori).

Mori Rin presents Oba Yozo as a tortured martyr in the above cover, setting the tone for the rest of the manga. In this layout, Dazai's name is also printed right in the centre, over Oba's torso, much larger and more eye-catching than Mori's name. The suggestion is strong that the many hands reaching out to Oba's body are also

simultaneously reaching out to Dazai, and thus we are encouraged to view the martyr Oba as the martyr Dazai and read Oba's story as a reflection of Dazai's life. Symbolically, it is a powerful cover that invites sorrow and sympathy for Oba. Oba is surrounded by and unable to escape the grasping hands, which come from all directions, suggesting Oba sacrifices himself for the sake of the hungry community. The rest of the cover is also abundant with symbols: he stands in a field of red spider lilies, the flowers a symbol of death and reincarnation, and there are butterflies fluttering around in the foreground, which are symbols of change and metamorphosis. A sun frames Oba's head, suggesting he is a bright, holy, life-giving presence to be worshipped. He holds a pomegranate, the fruit which kept Persephone in the underworld and which is a symbol for both death and fertility. Through this cover, we can tell that Oba is yearned for despite the aura of death that surrounds him, because in him there is reincarnation and new life waiting. Even before reading the rest of the adaptation, we can tell that Mori's interpretation of the novel reinforces the notion of Dazai Osamu as an eternal, popular presence.

Secondly, Mori Rin presents Dazai's work as a message of comfort that can speak to people's hearts across time. The inner flap has the sentence, "You are not the only one who struggles with human interaction." This suggests that Oba's story is a common one that will resonate with many. The story thus provides companionship,

understanding, and catharsis, as Oba's story can be the vehicle for the reader's negative emotions to be validated and released. The fact that Mori's 2021 work is an adaptation of a 1948 text further supports this messaging, as it suggests that this human struggle is universal across different times and contexts; others have lived through and survived this experience, and so too can the modern readers. Therefore, Oba is not a martyr for a meaningless cause, he is representative of a universal struggle.

Oba's connection with the holy realm and new life is emphasised through the classical and religious references scattered throughout the manga. For instance, Oba compares the prostitute he slept with to Saint Mary, as seen in the following image:



Fig. 49: Oba is cradled in Saint Mary's arms.  
Source: *Ningen shikkaku* (Mori).

Oba had intercourse with a holy being and is thus, in a straightforward manner, associated with virtue. However, the protective embrace of the prostitute with Oba's mouth resting against her breast, as though he is being fed, and the subsequent panel with a fallen Oba lying in Saint Mary's lap suggest he is her son, Jesus. Oba is now the reincarnation of Jesus and an epitome of new life and rebirth. Furthermore, women in plain clothing are knelt around them as though in worship, with one of them even reaching out as though she wants to touch him; this harks back to the cover with the grasping hands, and both images work together to cement the image of Oba as a holy martyr whose presence gives life. In addition, with the exception of Furuya's adaptation, the other manga adaptations end the story with Oba's line, "Everything simply passes." However, Mori continues the story just as the novel does, with an afterword during which the man who reads the letters has a conversation with the bar madam. She completes Mori's manga adaptation with the line, "The child was like God."





Fig. 50: The last page of the manga, with the bar madam recalling Oba Yozo in his youth and emphasising that he is like God.

Source: *Ningen shikkaku* (Mori).

While the example with the prostitute is from Oba’s first-person perspective, meaning he could be the only one imagining himself as the symbol of rebirth and new life, the final statement comparing Oba to God come from a character who knows Oba; she might have a bias for him, but she offers a third-person perspective. Ending the story with a third-person perspective that affirms his saintly person suggests strongly to the reader that Oba’s failures are not his fault and that he is simply too holy and too good for the human realm. “Yozo belongs to a sort of supernatural realm, and he [therefore] cannot

understand the essence of human life ... Dazai illustrated clearly that in this world, angels cannot survive” (Bloom 134-40). In both Steven Bloom’s and Mori Rin’s interpretations, Oba’s tragedy is not that he, a human being, tries to integrate into human society and fails. His tragedy is that he is a holy being who cannot survive in a tainted world but is forced to try. Even the natural world understands that Oba’s suffering is not his fault, according to Mori’s adaptation:

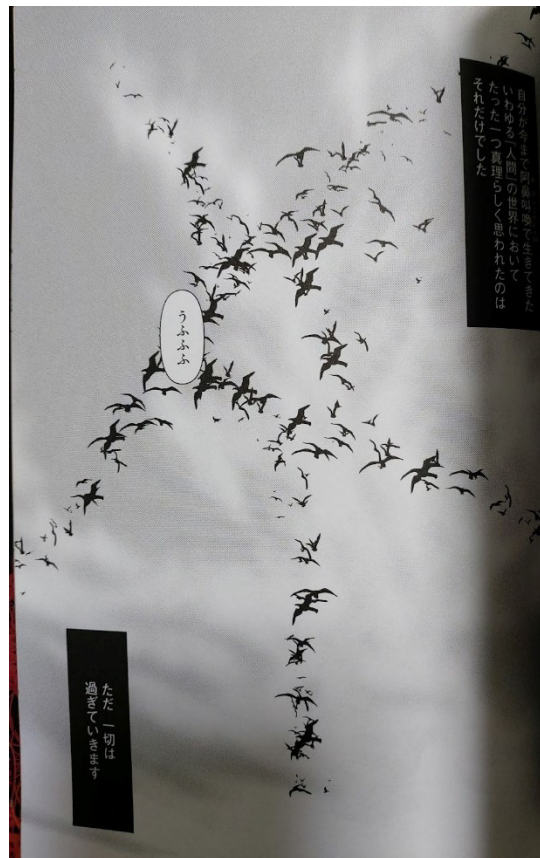


Fig. 51: A flock of birds form the kanji *onna* (women) in the sky.  
Source: *Ningen shikkaku* (Mori).

Oba’s ultimate tragedy is summarised in the above panel, where a flock of birds form the

kanji for the word “women.” Mori suggests that the natural world is responding to Oba’s personal story. She thereby elevates Oba’s story of personal despair and suggests that there is some form of destiny, fate, or cosmic force more powerful than the individual should be expected to handle. This page links us back to the worshipful women surrounding Oba, who is lying in the arms of Saint Mary, as well as to the hungry, grasping hands that surround Oba on the cover of the adaptation, the reaching arms presumably from women who see the potential for new life in Oba and desire it. I believe Mori’s interpretation of Oba’s tragedy and despair is faithful to the novel, wherein Oba helplessly develops relationships with women because he wants to please them, but when spelt out directly as the cause of his troubles as it is in Mori’s interpretation, it can have an alienating effect on Dazai’s fans, many of whom are women. However, this interpretation also presents Oba Yozo and Dazai Osamu as charming, attractive men who can effortlessly speak to women’s hearts. In so doing, Mori Rin’s work reinforces the popular interpretation of Dazai Osamu from the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

At the beginning of 2022, Mori Rin tweeted a promotion for the manga, with an image taken from the 19 January 2022 *Mainichi Shimbun*:



Fig. 52: A promotion for Mori Rin’s *Ningen shikkaku* in the 19 January 2022 *Mainichi Shimbun*.

Source: *Mainichi Shimbun*, retrieved from Mori Rin’s twitter page, <https://twitter.com/m0rilyn/status/1483741025982164995/photo/1>.

Either her manga adaptation, the original novel *Ningen shikkaku* she drew a cover for, or both in combination, achieved a sale of 6.7 million copies, which suggests her art or her version of novel is at least moderately popular. Of particular interest is the promotional text, “You cannot bring yourself to say you haven’t read it—the refinement found in Japanese literature.” The message is strong: you should feel shame if you have not read Dazai’s classic work, and if you read it you will become a more cultivated and refined person. The messaging is effective particularly for Mori’s adaptation, which has strong classical Western painting influence and symbolism which, if the reader learns about and understands, also means they have become more refined. In combination then, the promotional text and Mori’s work suggest Dazai’s works are important pieces of artistic and cultural heritage, and that Dazai is a representation of Japanese refinement and

cultivation, the complete opposite of *Manga de BUNGAJU*'s odourless and indistinct Dazai Osamu.

Representation of Japanese Art and Culture: Ninagawa Mika's live-action movie and POLYGON's animation movie

The above section concluded with Mori's 2021 adaptation and suggested that it presents Dazai as a representation of Japanese cultivation. The final section of this chapter continues that strand of thought with an examination of two movies released in 2019: Ninagawa Mika's *Ningen shikkaku: Dazai Osamu to san-nin no onna-tachi* and POLYGON's animation movie *HUMAN LOST: Ningen shikkaku*. 2019 was Dazai's 110<sup>th</sup> birthday and these works were released presumably at least partly in celebration. While one work focuses on Dazai's life and the other on a sci-fi version of *Ningen shikkaku*, I argue that through these works, both creators present and reinforce Dazai's image as a holy tragic hero (but not tragically despairing) who represents Japanese art and culture.

In *Ningen shikkaku: Dazai Osamu to san-nin no onna-tachi*, Ninagawa Mika presents her artistic vision of Dazai Osamu as both person and author. As its title suggests, the movie focuses on Dazai's relationships with his wife and two mistresses from the final

quarter of 1946 until his death in June 1948. Arguably, he is shown as a failed husband and father, his duties to Michiko and his three children all but forgotten as he indulges in alcohol and tobacco and attempts to write masterpieces. Simultaneously, Ninagawa presents him as a tortured artist whose purpose is to give birth to art and die for art, the title *Ningen shikkaku* referring to both his representative work and Dazai Osamu as a failed person. Tightly woven around the themes of art and creation, Ninagawa presents in this film a mixture of a Dazai Osamu who deserves our contempt due to his poor treatment of himself and the people around him, as well as Dazai Osamu as an artistic tragic hero. It is the latter portrayal, in particular, that this analysis will pay attention to.

The film begins with Dazai Osamu taking care of his daughter and son as they walk home along a bank of red spider lilies. The idyllic portrayal of Dazai as a family man is limited to this one scene; when they return home, Dazai opens the letterbox to see a love letter from his mistress, Ota Shizuko, and it is not long after this that he goes to Izu to spend time with her in exchange for access to her diary, which he uses as the basis for *Shayō*. After the novel achieves commercial success, he fails to acknowledge Shizuko when she comes to the establishment where he is celebrating and indulging in alcohol, despite her being pregnant with his child. Over the several nights he spends in the drinking establishment, Yamazaki Tomie, a working woman, becomes infatuated with

him, and she becomes his second mistress. Unlike Michiko and Shizuko, she is unable to become pregnant with his child, and her desperation eventually drives her to force Dazai into a lovers' suicide. Before his suicide, Dazai's editor, in love with Tomie and witness to Dazai's deterioration, vents his anger on him by calling him a "failed human being," and Michiko, having given up on Dazai being a faithful husband and father, orders him to "write a true masterpiece." He completes *Ningen shikkaku* seemingly in a writing frenzy before committing lovers' suicide with Tomie.

To understand how Ninagawa portrays Dazai as an artistic tragic hero, I approach this film through an examination of Ninagawa's cinematography, with a focus on her use of imagery. In particular, the colours of the flowers are vivid as we move through the seasons, from the blood red of the spider lilies the movie opens with to the soft purple of the hydrangeas the movie closes with. The use of flowers comes as no surprise to any viewer familiar with Ninagawa's photographic career, in particular her works depicting flowers in strongly saturated colours; "in spite of its surface artificiality, Ninagawa's photography powerfully conveys the abundance of life" (Matsui 272). For the purposes of the film, the artificially lively flowers serve two functions: firstly, they act as a metaphor for the potential for creation in Dazai Osamu; secondly, they represent the blend between artifice and reality in both the movie as well as the person of Dazai Osamu, rendering him

as both human being as well as eternal artistic figure.

Just like the flowers whose bright burst of colours signifies life, Ninagawa's Dazai is driven to write and create to a manic extent. As stated in the above summary of the film, his relationship with Shizuko is designed solely to gain access to her diary, from which *Shayō* is born. Simultaneously, the three women he has relations with recognise and crave his potential for creation, particularly as seen through Shizuko's and Tomie's desire for him to impregnate them. The successful impregnation of his mistress Shizuko is intertwined with the successful creation of *Shayō*, and Michiko's order for him to "write a true masterpiece" leads to the creation of *Ningen shikkaku*. While it is never stated how or why the women see his potential for creation, like the flowers present through the seasons and the entirety of the film, Dazai Osamu simply represents life to them.

However, as Matsui has argued about Ninagawa's photographic work, there is at the very least a surface artifice, if not a deeper one, and such artifice is reflected in Ninagawa's Dazai. The theatrical quality of the film underlines that artifice: as Dazai becomes absorbed in the writing of *Ningen shikkaku*, the environment around him falls away and becomes nothing more than simplified lines and boxes, suggesting he is on a stage bare of anything but himself and his novel. It suggests too that the environment, the



flowers, and even the women themselves are but an extension of his imagination, and that the artwork, the novel, and the depths of his creative mind reign supreme. The theatrical quality of his life further shows itself through the use of music reminiscent of traditional Japanese theatre to highlight moments of tension; it is unsurprising that Ninagawa uses such theatrical techniques in her work, having grown up with a father who was a famous director. Furthermore, Ninagawa has revealed that theatrical elements, as well as Dazai Osamu, had an influence on her in her youth (Shimada 113-14). In addition, the original novel *Ningen shikkaku* has elements similar to Noh theatre:

Another intriguing aspect of *Ningen shikkaku*'s structure is its similarity to the Japanese traditional theatre Noh. One basic Noh element is that "gods" wear masks to appear human. In other words, they eventually reveal their true nature, whether it is a spirit, the creator, or a devil that resides in another realm. The "god's" true nature is revealed when the supporting actor does something to provoke the "god" into showing his supernatural essence. Symbolically, the "god's" true nature is hidden by his mask, and that mask is of an old man, a young woman, or priest—an ordinary human being. (Bloom 139)

Bloom argues that Oba plays the role of "god" who eventually is forced to reveal his true nature because of his inability to live in society. Although Ninagawa does not consciously make a connection between *Ningen shikkaku* and the theatre, her portrayal of Dazai using theatrical elements strengthens the connection between Oba Yozo and Dazai Osamu, both of them gods among human beings. In her vision, Dazai is removed from the human

realm even though he physically is human; this is because, in truth, he is an artist-god dealing with artifice and creation. It is this dedication to art that brings about his death, his tragic flaw that renders him a tragic hero. Matsui states that

Ninagawa also has the photographic work that reveals the paradox of an intense pursuit of eternal beauty or life ending in the exposure of life's frailty ... in *Everlasting Flowers*, every brilliant image contains a shadow of decay, in spite of the bright colors and life-like shapes of the artificial flowers. (279)

Because of the infinite potential for creation and life the women see in him, the “shadow of decay” shows itself as he is drained of his life by them. In particular, Tomie, relentless about wanting to bear his child, forces him to copulate with her despite his fatigue or lack of willingness to. The pleasure is taken out of the sexual act or the act of creation, and when the copulation proves unsuccessful, Tomie decides death is preferable. In the end, it is both his potential for creation and inability to “create” with her that leads to his death.

Furthermore, I would argue that the blend between reality and artifice is key to portraying Dazai Osamu as an everlasting artistic icon. In Ninagawa's previous films, “she avoids realism based on strict and careful observation, creating a sense of novelty and artificiality in striking kimonos and flowers and unusual lighting, props, and sets. As a result, the audience feels that they have wandered onto the gorgeously decorated location of one of Ninagawa's photo shoots” (Matsumoto 286). The Dazai Osamu in her

film feels like a person forever captured in one of Ninagawa's shoots as well, frozen in time and preserved for all of eternity. After he coughs blood onto the snow and laughs about having created the flag of Japan, he topples over. As he is shrouded in snow, the snowflakes turn into white flowers for mourning the dead, accompanied with a soulful hymn that suggests he is a holy, spiritual figure. Dazai Osamu has been frozen in a moment near death, an eternal icon like the Japan he had coughed into the snow and given his life to create.



Fig. 53: Dazai Osamu coughs blood onto the snow. The red circle on snow forms the flag of Japan.

Source: *Ningen shikkaku: Dazai Osamu to san-nin no onna-tachi*.

In addition, Ninagawa presents Dazai Osamu as a man caught between reality and unreality, suggesting that he exists—or sees himself as existing—in a liminal space. In an

interview Shimada carried out with Ninagawa regarding her 2015 exhibition, *Self-Image*, she speaks of a series of photographs of people at a festival. “Losing one’s sense of ego while dancing to explosive music is a very primitive act, but do they look like they are having fun and are in a state of euphoria? It seems to me they aren’t. On the contrary, they look as if they are calling for help, or are frightened by the much-too-bright light” (Shimada 112). Her thoughts on festivals, that slice of unreal time in the midst of reality, carries through in the scene where Dazai Osamu finds himself lost in a festival. In this liminal space, he feels threatened by the laughing faces of children, the beats of the drums, and the procession through the streets. The unnaturally loud music and the splash of blood red that colours the scene highlight the fact that this is undoubtedly Dazai Osamu’s vision as he experiences the festival through the lens of his fears. In addition to the previously discussed scene of Dazai Osamu having bled his life away for the sake of the nation, one gets the sense that he is ultimately a figure worthy of our sympathy, despite the moral reprehensiveness of having had two affairs while being a married man.

Finally, to cement her portrayal of Dazai Osamu as a holy figure, Dazai Osamu goes through a reincarnation or revival in Ninagawa’s movie. The scene with Michiko doing the laundry on a sunny day after a long period of rain and, importantly, immediately after Dazai Osamu’s body has been found, would have suggested that we are moving on

from Dazai Osamu or that we are diminishing our focus on him, if not for the fact that it is not the last scene. Despite Dazai having drowned in 1948 while dressed in a kimono, the last scene of the movie shows Dazai Osamu, surrounded by water while dressed in a Western suit, opening his eyes and taking in a gasp of air:



Fig. 54: In the final scene of the movie, Dazai Osamu opens his eyes while underwater and gasps.

Source: *Ningen shikkaku: Dazai Osamu to san-nin no onna-tachi*.

This suggests Dazai Osamu is alive in the modern age or the modern imagination and that he is capable of endless rebirths, such that his death in 1948 is not final. Michiko moves on, but the audience does not.

Before concluding my discussion of Ninagawa's portrayal of Dazai, I would like to examine how the image of her Dazai is affected by the actor, Oguri Shun. Unlike the

manga, anime, and games examined in the previous sections, Ninagawa's work takes the medium of a live-action movie, and it is thus that this reading of Dazai takes into account the added layer of the film star's influence. While this thesis does not propose to cover it in depth, it is worth considering the academic studies centred on the association between a film star and the characters he or she portrays. For example, in his study of the discourses surrounding Ishihara Yujiro in 1950s Japan, Michael Raine argues that Ishihara achieved his stardom in the following way:

He arrived with a nice body and a bad attitude: both together made up his impersonation of a new kind of modern young masculinity associated with the *taiyōzoku*. But with the attacks on the *taiyōzoku*, he lost the attitude and kept the body. ... No longer a rapist, he's a favourite older brother. In response to the critiques of the *taiyōzoku* as "Americanised," Yūjirō stresses his fundamental old-fashionedness. (213-14)

Ishihara's body and persona was a signifier as to the changing moods of the times—accordingly, when an audience viewed him in cinema, they read in him, not simply in his character, the fashionableness of the *taiyōzoku* (Sun Tribe) and, after his attitude transformation due to the currents of the times, the old-fashioned familial nature of the Japanese. Similarly, Wada-Marciano argues that the success in Japan (as opposed to its lukewarm reception elsewhere) of *Blood and Bones*, a film about a *zainichi* (residing in Japan) Korean family, is partially owed to Kitano Takeshi's "complex star power as an

abusive and often absurdly witty television personality, a talented filmmaker (his films often include a pessimistic point of view, abrupt violence, and death) and a topical writer bitterly criticising the world of entertainment and Japanese society” (123). The character he plays, Kim Shun-pei, derives his power at least partly, if not mostly, through Kitano’s history in the entertainment industry and his persona.

The cases of Ishihara Yujiro and Kitano Takeshi suggest the close association the audience makes between a star actor’s personal history and the roles they play, with the audience bringing certain expectations to the film that colour their vision of the characters. Oguri Shun has similar star powers that must be considered for a fuller reading of Ninagawa’s interpretation of Dazai Osamu. Oguri began his acting career when he was thirteen, in 1995, and as of 2019 he had been in the entertainment industry for twenty-four years in the capacity of television actor, stage actor, voice actor, and director. His significant visibility over more than twenty years, coupled with positive reviews of his acting skills and, importantly, his personal charisma, give him star power. In Ninagawa’s words,

“I cannot think of anyone [who can play him] other than Oguri ... as for why ... Dazai Osamu enjoyed incredible popularity but was not looked upon favourably in the literary circles. In my mind being a star means being at the top...as a photographer, at several junctures [in my career] I photographed Oguri, and I have seen him, through films and my father’s

plays, dash to the top with incredible speed.” (*Eiga*)

Though Ninagawa focuses on the parallel between Dazai’s and Oguri’s star power, she also implicitly draws a parallel between Dazai Osamu’s lack of favour in the official literary circles of his time and Oguri’s position in the entertainment industry. Despite Oguri’s popularity, he is said to be critical of the entertainment industry, the poor scripts written for Japanese television dramas, and the lack of power actors have (Ito Sonoko). Narita Ryo, who acted as Sakura Junichi, Dazai’s editor, states that aside from his acting skills, Oguri is well-liked for several reasons: his effusive praise of others, his constant smiles, and the abundance of love his colleagues feel from him (*Asahi Books*). Whether due to his personality or the persona he created, in these interviews Oguri is presented as the modern mirror of Dazai Osamu. Oguri becomes Dazai, just as Ninagawa’s Dazai cannot be decoupled from Oguri’s personal history, persona, and star power. Any interpretation of her Dazai thus has the added layer of the star discourse surrounding both Oguri, as Dazai’s actor, and Ninagawa, famous photographer, as director.

Ninagawa’s movie was released in Japanese theatres in September 2022. Just two months later, another movie related to Dazai Osamu was released in November 2022: the animation movie *HUMAN LOST: Ningen shikkaku*. I argued that Ninagawa presented Dazai as an artistic tragic hero who gave his life up for creation; both her movie and Mori



Rin's manga adaptation suggest Dazai Osamu is a representation of Japanese art. In *HUMAN LOST: Ningen shikkaku*, Oba Yozo and, through him, Dazai Osamu are not quite artistic tragic heroes, but they are symbols of sacrifice and rebirth who represent Japan and her potential for endless hope and creation.

The movie takes place in Showa Era 111. "In a heavily polluted Tokyo, citizens wear gas masks in order to breathe, and any attempt at suicide is circumvented by the governmental body, SHELL, which detects such unusual activity through the nano-machine implanted in each person's body. Should one still somehow be beyond the point of saving, they turn into an aggressive alien creature, having gone through a "LOST Phenomenon," and have to be exterminated by SHELL officers. At 120, one would finally come of age" (Lee On Yee, "The Case of *HUMAN LOST: Ningen shikkaku*"). In this dystopian sci-fi transformation of *Ningen shikkaku*, Oba Yozo's story begins with him as a "failed human being"; having overdosed on drugs, he is forcefully revived by the nano-machine within him. It is only when his friend, Takeichi, brings him and a gang out in an attempted rebellion against SHELL that it is revealed Oba can never die, even after going through a LOST phenomenon and being fatally injured by governmental officers. Yoshiko, working for SHELL, declares him the saviour they have been searching for all along due to his unique bodily constitution; on the other hand, Horiki, a government agent

turned traitor, wishes to use him to destroy the country in order to rebuild it from the ashes. By the end of the movie, with both Yoshiko and Horiki dead after a massive fight, Oba takes on the role of saviour in a not-quite utopian, not-quite dystopian Japan, committing “suicide” and turning into the alien creature again and again to cleanse Japan and hopefully bring it towards the bright future Yoshiko had envisioned.

Unlike the previously discussed adaptations of *Ningen shikkaku*, *HUMAN LOST*: *Ningen shikkaku*'s Oba Yozo shares more in common with *Bungō sutoreii doggusu*'s Dazai Osamu than any other Oba: he is a hero and a guiding light for Japan, and his suicides only lead him to new life, just as *Bungō sutoreii doggusu*'s Dazai Osamu never succeeds in committing suicide and continues to act as guide and mentor to the other characters while simultaneously protecting the symbol of literature. Furthermore, this Oba shares little in common with the other Obas for a simple reason: the story has been changed to the point of unrecognisability. Some significant lines are a nod to the novel, but the plot is otherwise removed from the original novel. In this transformative work, Oba is shaped according to the creators' desire: he is now a hero who represents Japan.

Firstly, Oba is a much more proactive character in this version who does his best to contribute to society. Gone is the character who has several sexual relationships with

women and who succumbs to alcohol and drugs: Oba is devoted to Yoshiko and, even after her symbolic rape by SHELL and eventual death, he does not give up on her vision of the future and works to achieve it. When they first meet, Yoshiko shows Oba the technologically advanced and beautiful, unpolluted Japan she envisions:



Fig. 55: Yoshiko shows Oba her vision of the future.  
Source: *HUMAN LOST: Ningen shikkaku*.

Her vision of the future is in stark comparison to their reality, which is so heavily polluted that gas masks are needed in the areas where the middle- and lower-class citizens live. It is clear that Yoshiko's faith in not only the future of the country but also Oba's power to bring them there has an effect on Oba's heart. For example, when he draws a portrait of Yoshiko, it is with unpolluted blue skies as the background, symbolising the connection he makes between Yoshiko and beauty:



Fig. 56: Oba envisions blue skies behind Yoshiko as he draws her portrait. This is also the art used as a gift for movie-goers in the first week of the movie's release.

Source: *HUMAN LOST: Ningen shikkaku*.

Oba's devotion and love for Yoshiko is the driving force for him towards the end of the movie, when he works to change the country despite not knowing whether he will eventually succeed. His proactive and more decisive personality also shows in his interaction with Horiki. In this transformative work, Horiki's vision is the opposite of Yoshiko's. He believes the country can only be rebuilt by first destroying it, then building the country anew from the ashes. While Oba is not unsympathetic to this vision, his loyalty to Yoshiko gives him the strength to fight against Horiki. This is unlike the novel Oba, who does not know how to refuse Horiki when he asks Oba for money or brings him out to indulge in alcohol and women.



Fig. 57: Oba and Horiki injure each other after a massive fight. Oba eventually wins.  
Source: *HUMAN LOST: Ningen shikkaku*.

As seen in the above image, the power balance between Horiki and Oba is not one-sided as it is in the novel. Instead, both have weapons and they injure each other, and while in the novel Horiki is constantly in a superior position and able to pass judgement on Oba, in the animation film Oba wins this fight and gets rid of the powerful obstacle that stands between him and Yoshiko's vision of the future. Oba Yozo is now the hero that the audience roots for instead of the character the reader pities: he has the strength to stand up against the "evil" opposition, and he fights for love and hope despite a tragic situation.

Secondly, Oba in the animation film no longer represents suicide and despair, but eternal rebirth. At the beginning of the film, Oba is standing on top of a tall tower, and when he stabs himself, the audience is led to believe he is committing suicide. However, at the end of the movie when this scene is repeated, he falls off the tower, transforms into

the Other creature, and fights for the future. This is possible in this version of *Ningen shikkaku* due to the make-up of Oba's body. He is half-human and half-Other, which means when he "commits suicide" by stabbing himself, he turns into the Other, an alien creature that lives inside his body and that represents the LOST phenomenon. In this form, he is physically powerful, and if he were any other human being he would die after being defeated in this form. However, Oba is able to turn back from this creature into his human form. The cycle is repeated over and over so that Oba can use the LOST form to rebuild Japan and bring it towards the bright future Yoshiko envisioned.



Fig. 58: Oba is about to "commit suicide" to turn into the Other creature.  
Source: *HUMAN LOST: Ningen shikkaku*.

Oba and Dazai are therefore alive not only in the cultural imagination; Oba physically cannot die in this version of *Ningen shikkaku*. This suggests to the audience that hopelessness and despair need not lead to destruction and death, but can be transformed into hope and power for the future. The biggest change in the image of Oba and Dazai,

through the endless suicides turned rebirth, is that he is no longer trapped in his own thoughts and committing suicide as a form of personal escape; instead, this Oba thinks of transforming society, and his suicides are for the sake of the nation.

Thirdly, I argue that this Oba is representative of Japan, which can be observed through the theme of humanity in the film, the genre, as well as the dissemination of the film. Firstly, as shown in the summary, the people in this dystopic Japan are not allowed to die. Should they attempt to take their own life and are beyond the point of saving, they turn into an alien creature and this is known as the LOST phenomenon. At the beginning of the movie, we see the LOST phenomenon happen to a man. He mutters that “he is human” and that he wants to regain his humanity. However, he turns into the alien creature and is killed by SHELL officers. In other words, becoming “LOST” or “failing as a human being” does not only happen to Oba; it can happen to anyone around him, and it happens when people are desperate to find an escape out of their artificially extended life. This interrogates the theme of humanity in the following ways:

firstly, the state of not being allowed to die robs one of humanity; secondly, only death and turning into the non-human-like creature can, ironically, allow one to regain the most basic right to die—in other words, their humanity. Yet, in Horiki’s conversation with Oba, he reveals that the LOST state—that alien state—is the true form of human beings, despite its alien appearance. The loss of humanity—the definition of what it means to have failed as a human being—has been

broadened beyond novel Oba's personal problem into a societal phenomenon, as the LOST phenomenon can happen to anyone. (Lee On Yee, "The Case of *HUMAN LOST: Ningen shikkaku*)

If that is the case, Oba, who is able to "commit suicide" countless times and be reborn every time, is not only the saviour of the nation but also the best person to question what it means to be human. He is half-human, half-Other, and therefore a prime representative of a nation of people who no longer know what the definition of humanity is.

Secondly, the genre of science fiction is heavily associated with Japanese animation (Bryce and Davis 44), and apocalyptic themes in particular have "special meanings, for the Japanese apocalyptic imagination underwent drastic changes following the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki" (Tanaka). The dystopian setting in *HUMAN LOST: Ningen shikkaku* is, I argue, a parallel to the post-War context in which Dazai wrote *Ningen shikkaku*, a time during which the country was rebuilding itself and grappling with the unprecedented atomic annihilation of two cities. At the beginning of the film, Oba is in a "failed" state, which symbolises the defeated nation. However, as discussed above, his suicides only lead to endless rebirth for the sake of the nation. I believe the film suggests that just as Oba's despair is transformed into hope and the potential of a bright future, Japan has moved out of its defeated post-War state, gained



strength, and will continue to reinvent itself in the future.

Finally, the animation film was created to represent Japan on the world stage. On the jacket of the DVD, it is promoted as “a powerful cross between the peak of Japanese literature, *Ningen shikkaku*, and Japanese animation.” The film was first released to an international audience, the most notable of which was Anime Expo 2019 in Los Angeles, July 2019. This was four months before the movie was released in Japanese theatres, which means the film’s target audience was an overseas one. The promotional line, combined with its earlier release outside Japan, suggests strongly that this film is meant to show the capability of Japan in both literature as well as animation, which explains to an extent why it was not first released in Japan; presumably, the Japanese audience does not need a reminder of their country’s literature and animation. With the goal of the project being to showcase Japan’s capability, Dazai Osamu’s *Ningen shikkaku* being selected suggests he is the face of Japan.

Before finishing this section, I would like to briefly discuss the interaction between the voice actor and the character, Oba Yozo. Just as Oguri Shun adds an additional layer to the image of Dazai Osamu as an artistic tragic hero in Ninagawa’s film, Miyano Mamoru, Oba Yozo’s voice actor, adds star power to Oba and Dazai’s image and

also strengthens Dazai Osamu's presence in Japanese popular culture. Miyano Mamoru is a popular voice actor who has been working in the industry since 2001, and he is known in the entertainment industry as a singer and dancer as well. In particular for this thesis's interest, he is the voice actor for Dazai Osamu in *Bungō sutoreii doggusu*'s anime series. Thus, when he acts as Oba Yozo in *HUMAN LOST: Ningen shikkaku*, a discerning audience familiar with voice actors will associate Miyano Mamoru not only with Oba Yozo in this film, but also Dazai Osamu in another anime series. During the promotional talk show in Anime Expo 2019, Miyano Mamoru was even asked about his experience voice acting as Oba Yozo considering he acted as Dazai Osamu in *Bungō sutoreii doggusu*, which suggests the audience was well-aware of the overlap in his roles and interested in this topic. With such an association between the voice actor and both Dazai Osamu and Oba Yozo, I believe Miyano's star power not only draws attention to the author and his works, but also further reinforces Dazai Osamu's star status in Japan.

This chapter has discussed ten adaptations and transformative re-imaginings of Dazai Osamu's life and *Ningen shikkaku*. As can be seen from the five sections, none of the works fully agrees with another in terms of the presentation of Oba Yozo or Dazai Osamu. Some strongly emphasise his tragic life and the depression in *Ningen shikkaku*, some present him as a vibrant and powerful protector of literature, and many more fall in

between the two extremes of the spectrum. However, as argued at the beginning of the chapter, towards the end of the 2010s, the image of Dazai Osamu as a lively guiding light has become stronger, and I believe this draws from and reinforces the 21<sup>st</sup>-century dominant interpretation of him as a lively and humorous person, the emergence of which was discussed in Chapter Two.

Referring once more to the simplified version of Darnton's book history cycle, this chapter has gone into detail for stage two, where creators interact with not only the original text and author but also the popular interpretations of Dazai Osamu to create transformative works that appeal to their target audience. However, this chapter has only briefly discussed stage three, which is the reader and audience reception to the works and whether their views about Dazai Osamu has changed or been reinforced. This will be discussed in Chapter Four, where I use available resources from newspapers and online reviews to consider the wider significance that Dazai's image, as presented in these transformative works, has.

Chapter Four: Symbol of Rebirth, Potential Face of Japan: Dazai Osamu's Significance in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

In 1983, Dazai Osamu scholar Okuno Tateo published *Dazai Osamu-ron* (A Thesis on Dazai Osamu). In his foreword, he stated as follows:

It is of importance that the many people who relate to Dazai Osamu's literary works—or, the many who cannot help but concern themselves with his works for one reason or another, in other words, those who struggle with the complicated complexes in their minds—to consider the solutions he spent his entire life on coming up with. Simultaneously, I cannot help but feel that there will come a time when he will once again rise before us with new meaning. ... Dazai Osamu's works have a deep influence on the spiritual formation of many young people; this cannot be denied. ... From our standpoint in our modern times, we must critique him and revive him properly. Because he was Christ who bore the Cross for our sake. (9-10)

While his comparison of Dazai to Christ seems exaggerated, Okuno accurately predicted that Dazai Osamu would rise with new meaning. As examined in Chapter Three, the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century saw a substantial number of adaptations and transformative re-imaginings of Dazai Osamu's life and *Ningen shikkaku*. Okuno suggests that Dazai deliberately bent and broke his will in order to be accepted by society: “It was as though his entire life was a symbol of how terrible the modern times were. And this is why so many young people relate strongly to his works” (25). Okuno is not the only one to note the influence Dazai Osamu has on young people: as mentioned in Chapter

One, Hyodo Masanosuke, a professor in literature, stated that over the thirty years of teaching university students since 1950, they had an intense affection for Dazai Osamu's works, in particular *Ningen shikkaku* (132). This suggests that whether it was in 1950, shortly after Dazai's death, or in the 1980s, Dazai Osamu and his works have continued to have an enduring effect on young people in particular, and it is no surprise that his works continued to be popular and discussed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The perception of oneself as different from others and of suffering the burden of living in a world that does not cohere with one's internal understanding of self is, undoubtedly, of lasting appeal to young people who are grappling with their sense of identity and purpose, no matter the times they live in.

Building on the works examined in Chapter Three, I examine in Chapter Four how the 21<sup>st</sup> century audience receives and reacts to the transformative works and, in so doing, I ask the following linked questions: what are the implications of these 21<sup>st</sup>-century re-imaginings of Dazai Osamu and his works? In other words, why are these interpretations significant? What do they tell us about young people in Japan or about Japan's literary and popular culture spheres?

This chapter argues that Dazai Osamu is primarily a symbol of rebirth and

potentially a representation of Japanese national identity. However, this is contingent on his image being distinctive and appealing enough to be memorable among the audience while offering a low barrier of entry to a modern audience. In other words, he is an author for a new audience that is no longer as receptive to literature as people in the past were, and as such he also functions as a signal for how the literary realm should more actively collaborate with the popular culture realm for literature to survive. This chapter utilises examples from the works discussed in Chapter Three and the available information about reader reception of these works to illustrate the above argument. There is uneven coverage about reader reception, with some works receiving plenty of coverage in the major newspapers, such as *Bungō sutoreii doggusu*, some much less, such as *Ningen shikkaku: Dazai Osamu to san-nin no onna-tachi* and *HUMAN LOST: Ningen shikkaku*, and most with little to no newspaper documentation of reader reaction. As such, this chapter utilises both the content of the works and the reader reception where possible to discuss Dazai's significance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### Reader Reception and its Significance

In stage three of my proposed simplified version of Darnton's book history cycle,

the audience consumes the transformative works and revises or reinforces its image of Dazai Osamu, which then contributes to the dominant interpretation of him. I therefore first examine the available information on readers' reception of the works discussed in Chapter Three to understand what appeals to the modern audience and propose reasons for why they appeal to them. Unlike Chapter Three, where the works were examined in roughly chronological order, here I have organised the reader reviews and discussion from most newspaper coverage to least coverage to maintain as much consistency as possible with Chapters One and Two.

Among the ten works examined in Chapter Three, *Bungō sutoreii doggusu* enjoys the most newspaper coverage. *Bungō sutoreii doggusu* is set in modern Yokohama, and *Kanagawa Shimbun* introduced it in 2015 due to the popularity of its series, its setting, and its appeal to literature fans (11 Oct 2015). In 2014, when the Kanagawa Museum of Modern Literature first had a collaboration with *Bungō sutoreii doggusu*, the number of young visitors increased threefold as compared to 2013, which shows the concrete effect the series had on encouraging readers to explore the real authors (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 05 Oct 2016). In 2016, the year the first season of the anime was broadcast, there was particularly heavier coverage of the franchise due presumably to the heightened interest and increased number of collaborations. A high school student who attended the

collaboration with the Tanizaki Jun'ichiro Memorial Museum stated that she “wants to read his novels” because of the series (*Asahi Shimbun*, 02 Nov 2016); a collaboration with Tsugaru Railways for a special *Ningen shikkaku* train spurred discussion on the internet and drew Aomori fans to board the train (*Asahi Shimbun*, 04 Nov 2016); and fans were “surprised by the differences [between the character and the real author]” when they visited the Yosano Akiko Memorial Museum for the collaboration (*Asahi Shimbun*, 28 Nov 2016). Of particular interest is the surprise of fans who noted the difference between the manga character and the real author, which suggests their consumption of the transformative work affected how they viewed the real author and therefore shows the influence transformative works have on readers' reception of real authors and original texts.

In Chapter Three, I examined *Bungō to arukemisuto* in the same section as *Bungō sutoreii doggusu* due to their similar premises: both are series that re-imagine authors as characters. However, compared to *Bungō sutoreii doggusu*, *Bungō to arukemisuto* has less newspaper coverage, though that can be plausibly attributed to its later release (2016) as compared to *Bungō sutoreii doggusu* (2012) rather than its lack of appeal. A 2017 article about the *Kanda furuhon matsuri* (Kanda Secondhand Books Festival) made special note of the “Bungō gēmu to shohanbon” (Bungo Game and



First-Edition Texts) talk: eligibility to attend the talk was decided by lottery, and most of the 50 attendees were women. This talk was arranged because of *Bungō to arukemisuto*'s popularity, and according to the chief editor of the *Nihon koshō tsūshinsha* (Japan Classic Books Communication Agency), “[The game] is a chance for people to understand the charm of old, classic books in a new way” (*Asahi Shimbun*, 15 Nov 2017). Museum employees were also surprised by the number of female visitors during the game's collaboration with the Mushanokoji Saneatsu Memorial Museum (*Asahi Shimbun*, 10 Aug 2017); the collaboration with the Sato Haruo Memorial Museum was similarly well-received, and the messages from young visitors indicate they visited because of the game (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 17 Sep 2017); due to collaborations with the game, the Tokuda Shusei, Muro Saisei, and Izumi Kyōka museums saw a two to four times increase in visitor numbers as compared to the previous year (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 18 Apr 2018). Notably, a game fan who visited the Koizumi Yakumo museum and participated in the guided tour said, “There are many stories about him I did not know, and the guided tour and talks helped me greatly to understand Yakumo” (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 13 Dec 2020). This suggests the fan first knew of the author through the game and, inspired by it, returned to the real author to find out more about him. Her perspective might have been coloured by the game, but its effect on bringing people into contact with literature is

evident. The newspaper articles, in combination, show that there was a concrete increase in the number of visitors to literature museums because of collaborations with the franchises, and that fans developed an interest in the real authors because of the transformative works.

Due to the nature of the above two franchises, with one being a more passive medium (fans primarily read the *Bungō sutoreii doggusu* manga) and the other involving more interaction between fans and the work (fans primarily play the *Bungō to arukemisuto* game), it is difficult to draw a conclusion from a direct comparison of their online follower count. As of October 2022, *Bungō to arukemisuto*'s twitter account has around 101,900 followers. In comparison to *Bungō sutoreii doggusu*'s twitter account, which has 350,800 followers, three times that of *Bungō to arukemisuto*'s, the game's success might be seen to be comparatively moderate. However, it is difficult to ascertain how many users follow both accounts because they enjoy both series, and how many only follow one. In addition, these numbers do not accurately capture the number of readers or players, as some might enjoy the respective franchises without following the official accounts. Furthermore, as suggested above, *Bungō sutoreii doggusu* might have more readers because it takes less energy to passively consume a product, while *Bungō to arukemisuto* requires more investment from its players, which can explain the

discrepancy in follower count. However, ultimately, the language in the newspaper reports as well as the concrete increase in visitor numbers to museums suggests comparable levels of interest and popularity in both franchises with similar premises.

After taking the above analysis into consideration, I believe the reader reception towards the above two franchises illustrates the following points. Firstly, the popularity of the franchises is based on the visual and personality appeal of the characters; both present the authors as handsome, aesthetically appealing, and vibrant young men (and women, in the case of *Bungō sutoreii doggusu*). I believe the aesthetics and the vibrant characters immediately capture the attention of the target audience, primarily young women. Secondly, for a cross between literature and popular culture to be most successful, the barrier to entry needs to be low. I believe both franchises appeal greatly to young women, but *Bungō sutoreii doggusu* has more followers, a larger franchise, and greater reach because of its lower barrier to entry. Fans only have to passively consume the manga and, as argued in Chapter Three, the enjoyment of the plot is not contingent on reader knowledge. In other words, readers who do not know much about the authors can still enjoy the action scenes and the story, and those who know about the authors have an additional layer of enjoyment because they recognise the parody elements. In contrast, *Bungō to arukemisuto* has a higher barrier to entry because more active involvement is

needed on the player's part and the enjoyment of the content is dependent on the player's existing knowledge of the authors. The game is a format familiar to most players—*gacha* games such as *Fate/Grand Order* are well-known and well-loved in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century Japanese popular culture sphere, and therefore players who grew up in this popular culture environment will not find it difficult to adapt to the gameplay. However, they need to be diligent about logging on every day to complete missions and collect more author-characters, and their enjoyment of the author-characters' interaction is contingent on a deeper knowledge of the real authors. I thus propose that for literary transformative works to appeal to as wide an audience as possible, not only does the character design have to be aesthetically appealing and the interpretation of the characters in line with what the modern audience enjoys, the story should also be enjoyable without demanding active investment on the reader's or player's part. Furthermore, the increased interest in the literature museums is due to both *Bungō sutoreii doggusu* and *Bungō to arukemisuto*, one franchise with a lower barrier of entry, one franchise with a higher barrier of entry, which suggests that even fans who do not have as much existing knowledge of literature will still be enticed by literary collaborations that can deepen their enjoyment. Therefore, instead of appealing only to existing literature fans, there is no harm in lowering the barrier of entry to appeal to a wider group of popular culture fans first.

For Dazai Osamu specifically, there is insufficient evidence to suggest *Bungō to arukemisuto*'s Dazai had a particularly significant effect on its players. However, for *Bungō sutoreii doggusu*, as argued in Chapter Two, the privileging of Dazai and the use of him successfully drew fans to museum collaborations, even for author-specific museums that do not involve Dazai Osamu in any way. Furthermore, this is a Dazai who is lively, charismatic, and humorous, which further appeals to the fans because it agrees with the 21<sup>st</sup>-century dominant interpretation and image of him. Therefore, I tentatively argue that Dazai Osamu enjoys a level of popularity above the other authors, as seen in the case of *Bungō sutoreii doggusu*, and transformative works that interpret him according to the dominant, popular interpretation are able to more strongly draw people back to the literary realm.

Aside from the above two franchises, the two 2019 films, Ninagawa's *Ningen shikkaku: Dazai Osamu to san-nin no onna-tachi* and POLYGON's *HUMAN LOST: Ningen shikkaku*, also received some newspaper coverage, though they focused only on the premise of the films and the intention behind their creation rather than reader reception. Ninagawa stated her interest in the three women Dazai was entangled with and her desire to create a film where "everybody is happy in the end," which producer Ikeda Fumitsugu stated was a "reversal of values." In other words, she wanted to present a fresh

version and interpretation of Dazai's life that would intrigue the audience members because it challenges previously held beliefs about Dazai Osamu and the women he was involved with. In the same article, *HUMAN LOST: Ningen shikkaku*'s executive producer Iwano Mitsugu revealed that the aim was to be able to screen the film overseas and hence they used Dazai's work because of its global popularity (*Asahi Shimbun*, 25 Sep 2019). The two films, released in the same year, had very different motivations behind their creation: one was created with the intention to challenge and change Dazai Osamu's image, and the other was created to appeal to a global audience; Dazai Osamu simply happened to be the vehicle for the latter's ambitions. Therefore, it is worth considering if one version appealed more to viewers and, if so, what the significance is. To get an understanding of reader reception, I examined the box office returns for 2019 as well. *Ningen shikkaku: Dazai Osamu to san-nin no onna-tachi* ranked 27<sup>th</sup> with earnings of 1.3 billion yen, while *HUMAN LOST: Ningen shikkaku* did not make the top 40 (MPAJ). This suggests very clearly that *HUMAN LOST: Ningen shikkaku* did not have popular appeal. The box office returns concur with this researcher's personal, anecdotal evidence. I watched both movies on their respective opening weekends, but while Ninagawa's film played to a full theatre, *HUMAN LOST: Ningen shikkaku* was sparsely attended.

The reviews on *Eiga.com*, a site that promotes films and archives each film's

information, provide some reasons why *Ningen shikkaku: Dazai Osamu to san-nin no onna-tachi* had more appeal to the film audience. Ninagawa's film scores an average of three out of five stars on the site. An avid movie-goer with the "pro" status on the site praised her "vivid and rich use of colours" but criticised the weakness in her portrayal of "the aesthetics and beauty of *junbungaku* (Pure literature)" (Takamori Ikuya, 27 Sep 2019); another user who was going through a "personal *junbungaku* boom" had knowledge of Dazai's works and enjoyed the movie (Riyuki, 27 Aug 2022); on the other end, a user who only knows of Dazai's name and "Hashire Merosu" as part of *kokugo* education but otherwise does not read literature was interested because of the acting cast, and he or she concluded that "even for such a terrible man, there will always be women who love him. While watching I felt I slipped into the time period of the movie, and now I want to meet Dazai himself" (M hobby, 06 June 2022). Generally, Ninagawa's artistry and the acting cast were lauded, but there were mixed reviews on the portrayal of Dazai Osamu, with some reviewers feeling the film is a poor treatment of Dazai's character while others praised its accuracy. This can be attributed to the difference in existing knowledge when the audience watched the movie, but equally, I argue that it can be attributed to the differing dominant interpretations of Dazai Osamu, with some agreeing with the 20<sup>th</sup>-century dominant interpretation of a tragic and charming Dazai Osamu and

some arguing that it is too extreme.

I believe the reviews and box office returns of *Ningen shikkaku: Dazai Osamu to san-nin no onna-tachi* illustrate the points below. Firstly, the star power of the actors has an undeniable revitalising effect on literary material; it is particularly notable that there were viewers who were drawn to the movie because of the cast, despite their lack of existing knowledge about Dazai Osamu, and there were even some who were curious about Dazai Osamu after watching the movie, suggesting that Ninagawa's goal of challenging previously held beliefs was at least partially successful. Secondly, the artistry and fame of the creator has a smaller but no less noticeable influence on encouraging the modern audience to watch a film: as examined in Chapter Three, Ninagawa has built a reputation as a photographer who works with bold colours and flowers, and the audience appreciated that artistry despite their mixed feelings about the portrayal of Dazai Osamu or the depth of the story. Thirdly, the view of the "real" Dazai Osamu is still in constant debate, as the biggest divisive factor among the reviews is how accurate or palatable the portrayal of Dazai Osamu is. The fact that Dazai Osamu's "real" personality is still being debated more than seventy years after his death suggests that the view of Dazai Osamu is highly dependent on influences from the media, official agents, and fans.



As of October 2022, *Ningen shikkaku: Dazai Osamu to san-nin no onna-tachi* has 320 reviews on *Eiga.com* and *HUMAN LOST: Ningen shikkaku* has 52 reviews, which agrees with the box office data in that fewer audience members watched or knew about the animation movie as compared to Ninagawa's film. The animation movie scores an average of 2.8 out of five stars on the site. A user questioned the use of Dazai's name and suggested it was only included to appeal to the audience, because the story has nothing to do with *Ningen shikkaku* (Kuromaru, 22 June 2021); another user enjoyed the action scenes but made little comment on Dazai or the novel (Reo, 12 May 2021); another felt the science fiction concept was good but the execution was poor (Mayuki, 22 Feb 2022); one user tried to understand the "failure of a human being" theme and concluded it is because only human beings can commit suicide but nobody is allowed to in the film, and he or she made note of the fact that "it's an anime you can enjoy more if you have not read *Ningen shikkaku*" (kossy, 23 Dec 2019). While *HUMAN LOST: Ningen shikkaku* only scored 0.2 fewer stars than *Ningen shikkaku: Dazai Osamu to san-nin no onna-tachi* on average, the reviews expressed more confusion or were more critical when discussing the relevance of Dazai Osamu or *Ningen shikkaku* to the story, as compared to Ninagawa's film where the divisive aspect is the portrayal of Dazai Osamu. In addition, the animation movie does not encourage or inspire viewers with little or no existing

knowledge of Dazai Osamu to read his texts after watching the film; there is even the implication that having prior knowledge of Dazai Osamu's text would adversely affect one's enjoyment of the film.

I argue that the audience reception of *HUMAN LOST: Ningen shikkaku* illustrates the points below. Firstly, the audience still expects a certain level of faithfulness when a literary work is adapted or transformed, as compared to transformative works about the author where faithfulness is dependent on personal interpretation and where a generous amount of leeway is extended if the work is visually and aesthetically appealing. Secondly, a movie made to showcase "a cross between the peak of Japanese literature and Japanese animation," as the tagline of the DVD says, may not necessarily appeal to a domestic audience as it does to an overseas audience, particularly when the domestic audience recognises Dazai Osamu's name, associates him with classic literature, and is therefore more critical when the use of his name or text bears no relevance to the plot. Thirdly, the confused storyline obfuscates the meaning of Oba's repeated suicides, weakening the message of rebirth and hope that I examined in Chapter Three. This suggests that the audience is looking for not just an interesting adaptation but also clarity in works, and however nuanced or thoughtful the message is, it must be contingent on the work being easily understood and accessible.

The comparison of reader reception for the 2019 transformative films about Dazai's life and text therefore suggests that the star power and influence of the creators and cast is a strong draw factor for the audience, and the amount of existing knowledge about Dazai Osamu or his texts that they have before watching the film is less of a concern. However, for those who are familiar with the author and the original text, there is an expectation of some form of faithfulness in the film, whether it is to the audience's image of Dazai Osamu, or to the themes and story of the original text. In other words, there must be something recognisable and familiar for the audience to enjoy, dissect, and debate.

Lastly, I examine the reviews for the manga and anime adaptations of *Ningen shikkaku*. These adaptations were not discussed in the major newspapers, and thus I searched for buyer reviews on *Amazon.co.jp* as this site is accessible and commonly used by Japanese buyers to purchase manga and anime products. I will examine the reviews in chronological order of publishing or broadcast, beginning with *Manga de dokuha*'s adaptation. It received favourable ratings, scoring an average of 4.1 out of five stars across 203 ratings, and the following are examples retrieved from the 34 reviews on the site: the adaptation "maintains the atmosphere [of the original]" (Ichinose, 20 Feb 2014); while it has some flaws in details it is easy to read (Yumegotaro, 17 Dec 2019); the art

style is “unique” (Yamayamaya, 29 Apr 2018); “the content is not much changed [from the novel], but perhaps because it is in manga format, it felt scarier” (rei, 26 July 2013); and “it is a good introduction to understand Dazai’s works. I now want to read the original” (piblje, 24 Sep 2016). The reviews and generally favourable rating strongly suggest that the manga adaptation did make Dazai’s text more accessible and sparked some level of interest in reading the original. Importantly, they suggest that the readers appreciated the faithfulness to the original.

While *Aoi bungaku*’s adaptation received a higher average rating of 4.7, there are only 11 ratings, which leads me to believe it had more limited reach compared to *Manga de dokuha*’s adaptation. Among the seven reviews, one felt “this is a finely crafted piece of work that showcases fantastical visuals you can see only in anime as well as beautifully mournful music” (natura, 21 Aug 2011), but another felt it is not faithful to the original due to the “overemphasis on the Kamakura lovers’ suicide and the monster [inner demon]” (Shojiki, 02 Oct 2016). Those that mentioned Sakai Masato praised his voice acting. The praise for the medium agrees with Chapter Three’s argument that the anime allows us to see Oba’s first-person perspective and thus elicits sympathy for him, but the negative review points to a desire for faithfulness to the original. Finally, the praise for the narrator and voice actor suggests that just like how the audience was drawn to *Ningen*

*shikkaku: Dazai Osamu to san-nin no onna-tachi* because of the acting cast, star voice actors can also compel the audience to watch these transformative works and adaptations.

Furuya Usamaru's adaptation received an average of 4.3 across 51 ratings for the first volume, 4.3 across 34 ratings for the second, and 4.5 across 49 for the third. Among the 22 reviews for the first volume, one felt "it is a beautiful work that portrays the hellfire of the modern times" (Binrou, 26 Aug 2015); another who read the novel during his or her high school years felt "the visuals etched the story deeper into [his or her] heart, almost frighteningly so" (Kindle customer, 11 Jan 2013); and another commented on how the modern context makes it easier for a modern reader to relate to the text (Yamanashikun, 10 Apr 2010). The eight reviews for volume two generally agreed that the story is interesting, and two of them specifically commended Furuya's artistic skills. Finally, among the 16 reviews for volume three, one felt "manga is for entertainment, thus it cannot be helped that [Furuya] depicted salvation in it" (nano0125, 20 July 2020); another wondered if "literature's role is to expose human weaknesses" (Puremi, 03 Aug 2017); and another felt this adaptation is the "closest" to Dazai's original text (Marimo, 20 June 2011). While most agreed Furuya's manga was a good representation of Dazai's text, one criticised his depiction of Oba Yozo because Furuya's Oba is a "standard degenerate" rather than the novel Oba, who failed in being a human being (kiyo, 28 June

2011). From the summary of the reviews, the strength of Furuya's adaptation lies in the modern context which most agreed helps the 21<sup>st</sup>-century readers access and empathise with the text, and notably, it made at least one reader consider the role of literature. While only one voice among the many, kiyo's criticism of Oba's characterisation suggests a demand for faithfulness rather than purely for entertainment.

Among the adaptations, Ito Junji's comes second only to *Manga de dokuha*'s in terms of the number of ratings, and the high average score of his adaptation is comparable with the ratings for Furuya's adaptation, with a score of 4.5 across 122 ratings for volume one, 4.4 across 85 ratings for volume two, and 4.5 across 107 ratings for volume three. Among the 29 reviews for volume one, a reader who had read the original *Ningen shikkaku* felt it is a disturbing text and therefore lauded Ito for bringing out the disturbing and crazed quality of the original (Mauidapau, 13 Jan 2021), and on the other hand another reader stated it teetered on the borderline of maintaining *Ningen shikkaku*'s essence but ultimately "Ito Junji's world ate into it" (Kyle, 04 June 2018). Another user also commented on how the "Ito Junji world drew [him or her] into it" (marl marl, 04 Nov 2019), but the power of the Ito Junji world is such that a reader commented "this gets five stars as a horror manga but only two stars as an adaptation of Dazai's novel" (ME-arch, 06 Apr 2018). Of note, a reader went back to the original text and commented "you do see

an entry way into the horror genre if you search for it in the original” (sennotaba, 30 Dec 2017), which suggests the reader had a new perspective of the original novel after reading Ito’s adaptation. Of the ten reviews for volume two, one felt the style was a match for both authors’ works (noname, 05 May 2018), and another felt the combination between Dazai’s novel and Ito’s style produced “a wonderful piece of art” (Reon, 30 Mar 2018). Finally, among the 15 reviews for volume three, one reader who had not read the original novel felt Ito’s manga showed “the process of a person becoming broken” (Amazon customer from 2015, 20 Sep 2018), and a reader who did read the original novel accepted the changes Ito made and felt “no discrepancy” between the manga and the novel (Kzawa, 08 Dec 2018). Across all three volumes, there is a strong suggestion that the readers were familiar with the “Ito Junji world” and his horror aesthetics, and therefore the focus for those unfamiliar with Dazai’s text was whether they enjoyed the manga, while those who were familiar with Dazai’s text overwhelmingly felt it was a perfect match between novel and manga, despite the changes. This is in contrast to previously discussed adaptations, where readers demanded a high level of faithfulness to the original text, and thus it suggests that the influence of the creator has a vital importance in whether the audience can accept changes to the original. Most notably, the reviews for Ito’s manga show readers do revise their perception of the original text after reading the adaptation, proving

that these popular culture works participate in and influence the shaping of the dominant, popular interpretation of Dazai's image and personality.

On *Amazon.co.jp*, *Manga de BUNGA KU*'s adaptation received only 11 ratings and 3 reviews, making it the adaptation that has the most limited reach among the ten adaptations and transformative works I have examined. Compared to the other manga and anime adaptations it rates more poorly with 3.8 stars. The positive review stated "it is surprisingly easy to read ... the manga artist drew it in the modern style which adds to the ease" (Amazon Customer, 24 Dec 2018), while the two negative reviews criticised it for not being faithful to the novel (Yumegoro, 17 Dec 2019) (Moni, 01 July 2019). Furthermore, the *Manga de BUNGA KU* series did not produce more adaptations after publishing four adaptations in 2018. I argue that this shows the series did not hold mass appeal; despite the editing team using an art style that makes the adaptations easily readable for modern readers, the lack of a distinct or memorable style and, according to the two negative reviews, the lack of faithfulness to the original texts means there is no particular incentive to purchase this series.

Finally, Mori Rin's adaptation received fairly favourable ratings of 3.9 stars across 72 ratings. This is despite her limited experience in the industry as compared to the



authors and publishers of the above discussed adaptations, which suggests there must be something distinctive in her adaptation for it to be moderately well-received. Among the 33 reviews, the most notable is a user who said “if a novel is adapted accurately to manga format, there is nothing special about the story” (Amazon Customer, 02 Sep 2021). This is a departure from the reviews for the above discussed adaptations, which demanded an adherence and faithfulness to the novel, with an exception made for particularly famous authors such as Ito Junji. Most reviews made a comment on Mori’s art style, with some stating that the art style needs to be cleaner (Customer, 21 June 2021) (Amazon Customer, 16 July 2021), and some commenting on its unique flavour (Ronron, 02 July 2021) (akagoma, 04 July 2021). Many reviewers noted that it is a difficult novel to adapt to manga format, which suggests sympathy and understanding for Mori who is a new artist.

To summarise, the reviews for the six manga and anime adaptations illustrate these points. Firstly, the readers who have existing knowledge of Dazai Osamu and his texts demand faithfulness in the adaptations, but they also expect the adaptations to be interesting. In other words, they demand a fresh perspective that does not contradict their understanding of the original. Secondly, however, if the creator is famous, such as Ito Junji, or if the adaptation uses well-known names, such as *Aoi bungaku* using Sakai Masato as both narrator and voice actor, the readers are willing to accept changes,

particularly in the case of the former. Thirdly, there is a considerable number of readers who consumed these adaptations despite not knowing Dazai or his works beforehand, which suggests popular culture works do appeal to a wider audience and can provide a powerful gateway to the original texts. Fourthly, readers do revise their opinion and understanding of the text if they enjoyed the adaptation, which suggests these adaptations and transformative works have an impact on shaping and influencing the image of Dazai and his works.

There is a divide between adaptations of Dazai's text, and transformative re-imaginings of Dazai's person and life. For adaptations, faithfulness to the text while adding a fresh perspective is key to the modern reader's enjoyment. For transformative re-imaginings, the visual and personality appeal is vital, and it is particularly important for the works to agree with the dominant and popular interpretation of Dazai. However, for both adaptations and transformative works, the influence of popular creators, actors, and voice actors cannot be overlooked; they play an important role in attracting readers and audience members, who might have been previously uninterested in literature, to the transformative works and potentially the original literary works. Finally, there is concrete evidence that popular culture works revive and revitalise the literary sphere, with several audience members and readers expressing interest in the original text and author after

consuming these adaptations and transformative works.

I believe the last point is particularly notable in the context of the *hon-banare* trend, in which people across all ages read fewer books or do not have an interest in reading books. This trend started as early as the 1980s: a 1986 *Asahi Shimbun* article noted that children were reading far less than they used to, the main reasons being a lack of time to read and their preference for more exciting and fast-paced media like manga and video games (11 Aug 1986). Nor can one say this is happening only among children, teenagers, and young adults: the 2009 *Yomiuri Shimbun*'s investigation into reading habits showed that 70% of elderly aged 70 and above read no books per month, and those between the ages of 20 and 40 have less time to read because of work (*Yomiuri Shimbun*, 25 Oct 2009). The trend's strength is such that Ohashi Takayuki and Yamanaka Tomomi, an associate professor and a lecturer of Japanese literature respectively, investigated how novels can continue to survive in their 2020 text *Shōsetsu no seizon senryaku* (Survival Strategy for Novels), with the conclusion that the novel's integration and transformation into popular culture media is vital for survival (13). Dazai Osamu is arguably the prime example of a successful combination of the literary and popular culture realms. The adaptations and transformative works about his life and texts have drawn readers back to literature, which is impressive considering the widely available fast-paced and easily

consumable media such as manga, anime, games, and social media in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Compared to other authors, he has been widely and popularly discussed and read since 1948, and this popular interest in him has continued until the late 2010s and early 2020s. If Murakami Haruki is a representative of new Japanese literature, I believe Dazai Osamu is the most significant “classic literature” author for the literary field to consider when it comes to searching for a path forward for classic literature to survive.

#### A Symbol of Rebirth and Sacrifice

The above section examined the reader reception of the adaptations transformative works and suggested that the interest surrounding Dazai Osamu even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is an indication of how literary works can adapt and survive in a period when people are less drawn to *junbungaku* and books in general. Importantly, the consumer’s taste and preference must be catered to and, therefore, in particular for transformative works of the authors themselves, the popular interpretation must be considered.

To examine the significance of these transformative works more comprehensively, in this section, I have carried out a cross-section content analysis of the ten works and

argue that, according to the 21<sup>st</sup>-century creators, Dazai has new significance as a symbol of rebirth. As demonstrated in Chapter Two, there was a considerable effort made to change Dazai's image into that of a lively, humorous guiding light, and this effort was successful as the dominant, popular interpretation of Dazai among the public changed; he is no longer the charming but gloomy and tragic post-War symbol. I believe several creators took the change into account and proposed that Dazai is a symbol of rebirth and a guiding light for how Japan can transform itself.

At the beginning of this chapter, I quoted Okuno who compared Dazai to Christ, a figure who will rise with new meaning. The image of Dazai as a symbol for rebirth is shared across several works. For instance, Furuya's Oba is figuratively Christ sacrificed on a cross:



Fig. 59: In Oba's hallucination, he is tied to the cross and surrounded by dead people.  
Source: *Ningen shikkaku* (Furuya), vol. 3, ch. 12, p. 195.

By illustrating Oba tied to the cross in a desolate landscape where everybody else has died, Furuya portrays Oba as a man who must symbolically die in order to save other people similarly crushed and defeated by the unforgiving society. Just like Jesus, who died to cleanse humanity of its sins, Oba Yozo has taken all the failures of society unto himself, and his sacrifice is arguably so that those who read his story can find cathartic release and do not allow this same outcome to happen to themselves or others. In addition, Furuya's ending, where Oba is in a rubbish heap muttering about how he is moving on to "the next plane of existence" (vol. 3, ch. 12, p. 220), suggests that he will be reborn and will lead a new life. The depiction of Oba as God is shared in Mori Rin's adaptation,

where Oba on the cover is a symbol of metamorphosis, death, and rebirth, as well as on the final page where the bar madam, faithful to the original novel, describes Oba as “like a god” (194). Symbolically, Dazai has been reborn in *Bungō sutoreii doggusu* and *Bungō to arukemisuto* as a guardian and protector of literature, his presence as a character in these popular culture franchises suggesting he has taken on new life beyond the literary realm, and Ninagawa’s ending scene with Dazai opening his eyes and taking in a gasp of air, no longer dressed in the kimono he committed lovers’ suicide in but in modern, Western clothing, tells us very clearly that she imagines him as symbolically alive in the modern cultural imagination. Finally, *HUMAN LOST: Ningen shikkaku* shows very clearly that Oba’s repeated suicides only lead to him being reborn again and again, each of his deaths serving the nation and bringing it to a better future.

During the Second World War, Dazai Osamu read the Bible rigorously and independently without participating in the Christian community, and therefore

he embodied the bible according to his own interpretation ... [h]e saw the act of suicide as synonymous with Jesus [dying on the cross] ... It is possible that he picked up only on the concept of “death” within the Bible ... seeing himself as a solitary man standing before God, he etched his “obligation” to die for the sake of literature into his works. (Kazusa 164-71)

Following the above argument, Dazai elevated the act of personal suicide to the

equivalent of Jesus's death on a cross, except instead of dying for the sake of the people and therefore absolving them of their sins, Dazai died for the sake of literature itself. More than sixty years after his death, his vision of a glorious death for the sake of literature and art has been realised in these transformative works; they have represented him as a symbol of eternal life as well as rebirth and new hope after despair. This is particularly so in the case of Ninagawa, who depicts Dazai as a tragic hero for art, and POLYGON, which portrays Oba as a martyr for the sake of something greater than himself.

By changing the portrayal of suicide, these works circumvent the problem examined in Chapter One, that of *Ningen shikkaku* being too hopeless and tragic to be suitable for commercial entertainment (*Asahi Shimbun*, 13 June 2009). Aside from agreeing with and reflecting Dazai's changed image in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, during which time various people and institutions worked hard to dissociate him from his tragic suicide and associate him with liveliness, humour, and human bonds, I believe these works are also a reflection of the changing attitude to suicide in Japan. While this thesis cannot carry out a thorough investigation into the societal problem of suicide in Japan, I briefly examined the suicide statistics provided on the National Police Agency website. The earliest data is from 2004, which shows a total of 32,325 cases of suicide in that year. The latest



complete data is from 2021, which shows a total of 21,007 cases of suicide in that year. As of September 2022, there has been 16,331 cases of suicide within 2022. Generally, the number of suicide cases has decreased over the course of the past 18 years, which suggests there might be better support for the citizens and perhaps a less romanticised view of suicide among them. For instance, the high-profile case of Takahashi Matsuri's suicide from overwork was taken seriously by the nation. Her case prompted not only the company, Dentsu, to address the problem of overwork, but also prompted the Japanese government to more tightly limit the maximum number of overwork hours legally allowed per month (*The Straits Times*, 29 June 2018). This suggests that her suicide was viewed as heavily shocking and tragic, leading to serious soul-searching in the nation. It would be over-reach to suggest the transformative works about Dazai can concretely aid in discouraging suicide ideation, but they arguably respond to the mood of the times by showing that even an author so closely associated with suicide can become a symbol of rebirth and hope instead.

#### Dazai Osamu as a Representative of Japanese National Identity?

In this final section, I examine the newest element added to Dazai's image. He is

not only a symbol of rebirth as examined in the above section, he is now potentially a representative of Japan. While the above sections addressed the significance of Dazai in Japan's domestic literary and popular culture spheres, this section examines the presentation of Dazai as the face of Japan using the cases of Ito Junji's manga adaptation of *Ningen shikkaku* and POLYGON's *HUMAN LOST: Ningen shikkaku*.

The concept of using Japanese popular culture to appeal to a global audience is not a new one. In 2002, Douglas McGray published an article discussing Japan's "Gross National Cool." In the article, he argues that Japan has "reinvented superpower ... Japan has far greater cultural influence now than it did in the 1980s, when it was an economic superpower" (47). This is due to the "national cool" of Japan's culture, particularly popular culture and youth culture, that appeals to global consumers. The discussion surrounding Japan's "Gross National Cool" in the 2000s led to the Japanese government's "Cool Japan" initiative. As of 2019, the Cabinet Office defines the strategy as follows:

Cool Japan" is Japan's "charm" based on what the global audience views as "cool" (inclusive of that which has the potential [to be "cool"]).

The fields have the potential to reflect and expand on global demands and desires, and they are inclusive of but not limited to "food," "anime," and "pop culture."

This strategy strengthens Japan's soft power by "resonating" with the global audience and in so doing strengthens Japan's brand and increases

the number of foreign fans who love Japan.

As can be seen, this strategy focuses on Japan's "charm" from the perspective of the global audience, meaning that it is paying close attention to the tastes and demands of a global audience for economic gain. Logically, this means that what resonates with a global audience is focused on and promoted, suggesting that domestic taste is helpful but not necessarily what the "Cool Japan" strategy prioritises.

As seen in Chapters One and Two, Dazai Osamu and his texts have been gaining foreign attention ever since at least the 1960s, and here I examine Dazai Osamu as a face for Japan's national branding via "Cool Japan," first with the consumption of Ito Junji's *Ningen shikkaku* overseas. For Ito Junji, his primary aim was adapting the text for the tastes of middle-aged men, meaning his manga was for a domestic audience. However, Ito Junji's popularity as a horror manga artist spreads beyond Japan, such that his adaptation sparked an interest in the original novel in the United States. According to New Directions, the publishing company for Donald Keene's translation of *Ningen shikkaku*,

This wave of interest began around 2020. The catalyst was horror manga artist Ito Junji's manga adaptation of *Ningen shikkaku*, which was translated into English in 2019. In addition, *Bungō sutoreii doggusu*, a Japanese manga series in which Dazai is an important character, was translated into English in 2016, and that is also a major reason [why there

is an interest in *Ningen shikkaku*]. (*Daily Shincho*)

This suggests not only that readers explore the original texts because of the transformative works but also that Dazai Osamu has the potential to become a representative face of Japan and Japanese literature in a global market. While I do not think the Japanese government actively sought and promoted Ito Junji's work, meaning his work incidentally achieved success both domestically and overseas, I believe this shows the potential of harnessing popular creators' transformative works to shape Japan's literary image overseas. The field of literature is traditionally less associated with “cool,” but the transformative works about Dazai Osamu now show how there is future potential in tapping into this field.

Compared to Ito Junji, POLYGON's marketing strategy explicitly targeted the foreign audience. As shown in Chapters Three and Four, *HUMAN LOST: Ningen shikkaku* was first screened for a global audience before it made its way into Japanese theatres, and it was promoted as a cross between Japanese literature and Japanese animation. In essence, it was promoting “Japanese-ness” to the global audience by using an author the audience is familiar with as well as a genre—science fiction—that they associate strongly with Japanese animation. However, the team also strove to make this a “global” production. For instance, during the Anime Expo 2019 talk, POLYGON invited

the band m-flo, which produced the theme song for the animation film, and they consciously highlighted the different nationalities the band members are from, which seems to suggest that this film is meant to have universal appeal. While it is difficult to ascertain how well-received the film is overseas, the response from the domestic audience shows it clearly did not resonate with them. As such, despite the presentation of Dazai as a face of a globalised and cosmopolitan Japan, because of the discrepancy between the Japanese audience and the supposed “Japanese-ness” of the film, I question whether it can be truly said to showcase Japan. I believe there is potential in Dazai’s image being shaped as the face of Japan, but that is contingent on the transformative work resonating with the audience.

To conclude, this chapter has examined the third and final stage of the proposed simplified Darnton book history cycle, the reader and audience reception of the adaptation or transformative work and how that affects the dominant, popular interpretation of Dazai Osamu and his texts. Readers who know the original text demand faithfulness with a fresh, interesting perspective, readers who do not know the original text primarily seek entertainment and are drawn to works that have a low barrier of entry as well as aesthetic appeal, and depending on the strength of the popular culture work or the influence of the work’s creator, readers visit or revise the original text and author,

which can lead to future changes in the popular interpretation of Dazai Osamu. I argued that he has been presented as a symbol of rebirth and potentially the face of Japan in these popular culture works, but whether those new images will become the dominant interpretation remains to be seen over the coming years. Finally, on a practical level, he is a prime example of how the literary and popular culture realms can have a mutually beneficial relationship. If official agents of different authors in the literary field more actively seek collaborations with influential creators while understanding and appealing to the public's popular interpretation of those authors, there is a potential for revived interest in classic authors and new life for them.

Conclusion: Dazai Osamu and the Crossroads Among Japanese Literature, Popular Culture, the Media, and the Public

This research began with the researcher's curiosity as to why Dazai Osamu is so popular and what meaning he has, and it developed into an examination of the interaction among media, literature, popular culture, and—importantly—Dazai Osamu himself. However, this Dazai Osamu I explored is not necessarily the “real” Dazai Osamu. Instead, this is the “image” of Dazai Osamu that has been formed and re-formed ever since 1948, such that the “Dazai Osamu” we know now is very different from the “Dazai Osamu” of the post-War years and the “real” Dazai Osamu. This thesis was thus an attempt to answer the following questions: what were the public's interpretations of Dazai Osamu? What were 21<sup>st</sup>-century popular culture works' interpretations of him, and how did they interact with, strengthen, or revise the public's perception of “Dazai Osamu”? What do these popular culture works and the public's reception of them tell us about the significance of Dazai now?

In Chapter One, I studied the newspaper articles that discussed Dazai Osamu from 1935 to 2000 to understand what the public's interpretation of him was. The most important finding was the fact that the public interest in Dazai only exponentially increased after his lovers' suicide in 1948 due to the media sensationalising of it.

Therefore, Dazai Osamu's image was primarily formed based on the nature of his death—"scandalous" because it is a lovers' suicide with his second mistress—and *Ningen shikkaku*, popularly read as a confessional novel by the public. The public formed the view of him as a charming and charismatic man who attracted women easily but who was also tragic, gloomy, and plagued by the pressures of the unforgiving society (an interpretation drawn not only from the post-War conditions and his real anxiety but also from Oba Yozo's sufferings in *Ningen shikkaku*). This image they formed of him was so strong that a 1967 transformative work based on Dazai's works, "Dazai Osamu no shōgai," was criticised for showing too much of his depression while showing none of his charm. The public had formed an interpretation of Dazai Osamu and they were adamant that this should be adhered to.

However, this image was not eternal. By the late 1990s, there were signs that Dazai Osamu's image was changing, and in Chapter Two I examined this change of Dazai Osamu's image as seen in the newspaper articles that discussed him and the presentation of him in the Dazai Osamu Memorial Museum. Tsushima Sonoko proposed that his memorial not be associated with his suicide but with his birth, and from then on, every June 19<sup>th</sup> in Aomori Prefecture, Dazai Osamu's life was celebrated. It was the beginning of the concerted effort in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, by publishers and institutions associated with



Dazai Osamu, to change his image into that of a lively, humorous man, one who is even a guiding light for people to build and repair human bonds. This change of his image was also successful because the public had, by then, read beyond *Ningen shikkaku*; while it still by far remained the work most people thought of when they heard his name (“Hashire Merosu” being the other work because of its inclusion in the *kokugo* textbooks since 1955), there was better recognition that Dazai Osamu’s range is wider. The newspapers, accordingly, reflected and reinforced this changed image, highlighting not only Dazai’s continued popularity but also discoveries, talks, and events that contribute to the image of Dazai Osamu as a charming, vibrant writer far removed from the image of the post-War years. The image of Dazai Osamu as a guiding light was strengthened by his representation in popular culture works such as *Bungō sutoreii doggusu*, in which Dazai Osamu not only protects the literary realm but also opens the doors to the wide world of literature, encouraging people to take a step in and enrich their lives.

How then does Dazai Osamu’s image interact with popular culture? In Chapter Three, I analysed ten 21<sup>st</sup>-century adaptations and transformative works based on Dazai Osamu’s life and his post-War representative work *Ningen shikkaku*. I examined the images of Oba Yozo and Dazai Osamu formed across a range of anime, manga, game, and movie products; depending on the work, it either contributed to education—by making

literature more accessible through a popular culture medium—or appealed to readers and audience members who wanted to be entertained and who gained additional enjoyment out of a familiar name and text being adapted. In some cases, the work was both educational and entertaining. I argued that there was a general shift from Dazai Osamu being presented as a tragic, gloomy man in the late 2000s to Dazai Osamu being presented as a handsome and vibrant symbol of rebirth by the late 2010s, which meant the works were generally responding to the popular mood and interpretation of the times.

Finally, I examined the 21<sup>st</sup>-century public's response to these works in order to understand what significance Dazai has now. The response to the works differed depending on whether or not the person had existing knowledge of Dazai Osamu and his works; those that did demanded faithfulness to the texts, and there was debate and disagreement over what Dazai Osamu's personality "really" was when people consumed transformative re-imaginings of Dazai's life. Those who had no existing knowledge looked primarily for entertainment and, encouragingly, some were interested enough that they explored the original literary text after consuming the adaptation or transformative work. However, both types responded well to popular and influential creators and were willing to accept their version of Dazai Osamu, especially in the case of Ito Junji. The suggestion is strong that Dazai Osamu's image continues to be malleable. He is both a

bastion of classic literature and an entertainment figure, and as long as the presentation of him adheres to either the 20<sup>th</sup>-century or 21<sup>st</sup>-century popular interpretation, the readers will accept the work. Importantly, their reception of these works show there is a strong potential for literature—not just Dazai Osamu—to be revitalised if there is cooperation between the literary field and the popular culture realm, and if both fields pay close attention to the demands and tastes of the modern consumer.

Working under the framework of Darnton's book history cycle, with an emphasis on the active use and transformation of the book (and author) for its continued survival, I have argued the following: the media plays a vital role in the creation of the dominant interpretation of Dazai Osamu, to the extent that it took concerted effort by various figures and institutions in the late 1990s to 2000s to change his image from a charming but tragic post-War writer to a lively, humorous guiding light. In my hypothesis, I proposed that Dazai Osamu is now seen by the public and agents such as publishers and institutions as a positive force for progress and symbol of rebirth for not only Japan but also a global audience. However, my findings suggest it is more complex than I originally thought. The transformative works towards the end of the 2010s do portray him as a symbol of rebirth and hope as well as the face of Japan, but the public's reception to this image is mixed. Therefore, I believe the new image of him as a symbol of rebirth and face

of Japan has potential for the future but is currently tentative, and the latter image of Dazai as the face of Japan is particularly uncertain.

### Contributions and Limitations of this Research, and Recommendations for Future Research

There has been a rich amount of research done on Dazai Osamu's life and his works, such as literary analyses of his texts, the political, cultural, and social environment within which he lived and wrote, the connection between his life and his works, and the significance of his works across different contexts. In addition, manga research is a rich and established field in Japan, and anime studies as well as game studies has gained strength within the last two to three decades, meaning popular culture as a whole is now a vibrant field of academic study. This thesis has built on the existing research on both Dazai Osamu and Japanese popular culture and proposed an in-depth examination of the cross among not only these two fields, but also the media and the people. By examining not only the works but also the modern audience's reception of them, shaped by the media, this thesis also offered possible solutions to revitalise the literary sphere based on concrete audience feedback. Furthermore, the adaptations and transformative works

examined in this thesis are from the recent two decades, and some are even from the late 2010s and early 2020s. Therefore, I believe this thesis also offered a fresh and updated perspective on Dazai Osamu.

However, this thesis focused only on one of Dazai's texts, *Ningen shikkaku*. There are many more adaptations and transformative works of Dazai's other texts, such as "Hashire Merosu," *Shayō, Joseito* (Schoolgirl), and his fairy tales, and I believe taking these works into account will offer an even more complete understanding of Dazai Osamu's image and significance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As such, this is an area that I recommend for future research, whether the researcher is a Dazai Osamu specialist or a researcher of literature or popular culture. In addition, this thesis focused only on Oba Yozo and Dazai Osamu's image in the ten adaptations and transformative works, while these works offer a lot of space for exploration beyond the protagonist's image. Thus, it is worth considering an in-depth analysis of each work for the future. In addition, the framework I used is only a simplified version of Darnton's book cycle history model, and this thesis only briefly examined the publishing industry and the institutions centred on Dazai Osamu. For future research, the other stages of Darnton's cycle are worth exploring to see how, for example, the translations of his works affect his image overseas, or how the processes and functions of the publishing industry shape Dazai Osamu's

image. Finally, for a more complete examination of the intersection between the literary and popular culture spheres, it would be worth analysing not just Dazai's presence in 21<sup>st</sup>-century popular culture but also other authors'.

### Final Concluding Thoughts

If one of the features of postmodernism is “the erosion of the older distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture” (Jameson 1759), then Dazai Osamu is the very face of postmodernism. By the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Dazai Osamu is the face of both classic, educational *junbungaku* as well as popular culture, packaged in the form of an aesthetically attractive anime, manga, or game character. If one were to ask a member of the public what they know about Dazai Osamu, the answer could be “that character from *Bungō sutoreii doggusu*,” or it could be “the author who wrote “Hashire Merosu” and *Ningen shikkaku*,” or it could be both. The odds are equal. In the Introduction, I made note of Stuart Hall's understanding of popular culture: he states that popular culture is involved in an ongoing struggle with elite culture which seeks to include popular culture in its definition of that which is dominant culture (187-89). It seems that in the case of Dazai Osamu, the tension that Hall observes between popular culture and elite culture no

longer exists; the elite culture of *junbungaku* and popular culture have become one.

What does this mean then for Dazai Osamu or for Japanese popular culture? In Chapter Three I cited Azuma Hiroki's argument about the database to show that *Manga de BUNGAJU*'s adaptation was created to appeal to the "database animals." Dazai Osamu, in that work, was transformed into a handsome man with *moe* elements, and there was nothing distinctive about him. He has, in essence, become the most ubiquitous anime character. Neither does Oba Yozo in *HUMAN LOST: Ningen shikkaku* look any different from a *shōnen* (teenage and young boys) manga protagonist; his hair even turns white from trauma, a common and well-loved trope among *shōnen* manga from *D.gurēman* (*D.Gray-man*) to *Tōkyō gūru* (*Tokyo Ghoul*). Will Dazai become, eventually, a handsome but unmemorable anime, manga, and game character, integrated seamlessly into the popular culture sphere?

While I think Dazai Osamu's image remains malleable and in flux and he will continue to be worked and re-worked to appeal to the modern audience, I do feel there is a distinctive aura and flavour to him that several 21<sup>st</sup>-century creators have kept and maintained. There is still an instinctive respect and, to some extent, even resistance to classic literature, and that respect and distance have translated into Dazai Osamu's tragic hero image in Ninagawa's film or the dark realism in *Manga de dokuba*'s adaptation. In

addition, even while there is a sense of play in works like *Bungō sutoreii doggusu* and *Bungō to arukemisuto* that have transformed him into a visually appealing character (according to the standards of the current anime industry), they also elevate him by proposing that he is a guardian of literature, which once more shows a certain instinctive respect for the field. As such, I believe that while there is no longer a clear distinction between high culture and mass culture or, in this case, the literary and popular culture realms, the treatment of literature in the popular culture works suggests that some of the *junbungaku* air has been inherited and maintained.

Dazai Osamu's *Ningen shikkaku* was published in 1948, and as of 2018, the seventy-years copyright no longer applies to this text. As such, there are now new translations of *Ningen shikkaku* available, such as Mark Gibeau's version released on 18 November 2018, Ken Kobayashi's version released on 18 December 2019, Strelbytskyy Multimedia Publishing's version released on 01 January 2020, Henry F. Williams's version released on 03 February 2022, Jacopo Pandolce's version released on 18 February 2022, and Mariana Evies's version released on 21 June 2022. On average, it seems like there is one new translation of *Ningen shikkaku* being published every year, and there will likely be more to come over this coming decade. The wave of new translations suggests there is not only market demand but interest and excitement surrounding Dazai Osamu.



The new translations can potentially attract new readers and, importantly, they mean that Dazai Osamu's text is still being "used," which Tanji Yoshinobu argues is vital for the survival of literature. Dazai Osamu is possibly the strongest remaining representative of *junbungaku* (however resistant he himself might have been to the concept of the *bundan* during his lifetime), and it is hoped that he continues to survive and be "used," discussed, and transformed for a long time to come.

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