

No Longer Human: Prologue / First Notebook

"I can't even guess myself what it must be to live the life of a human being."

An unnamed author in post-war Japan is given three notebooks by the proprietress of a bar frequented by a 'madman'. Alongside the notebooks, she hands over three photographs, depicting the notebook's writer at different times in his life: as a child, a teenager, and an ageing man. There's something disturbing about each of the photos, something the viewer can't quite put his finger on. The pictures look a little off, as if the subject is not quite human...

Presently, the writer reads the notebooks and we discover they are the written memoirs of Yozo Oba. The first notebook tells of his childhood. He comes across as a peculiar boy with something of a dark secret; it is implied one of the servants did something to him. Whether or not because of this secret, Yozo finds it difficult to connect with others. In order to deal with society, he crafts a clownish personality that endears him to others and spares him from punishment. However, his behaviour also prevents him from forming close relationships, and his isolation and shame will dog him all the way into his adult life.

Knowledge Check

Try to answer these questions from memory:

1. How is the boy's face described in the first photo?

- (a) A coarse visage
- (b) Refined features
- (c) A stubby nose
- (d) A monkey-face

2. What is strange about the second image?

- (a) He's extraordinarily handsome
- (b) It utterly lacks substance
- (c) It gives a sensation of complete artificiality
- (d) All of the above

3. Where was the third picture taken?

- (a) In a dirty room
- (b) Beside a pond
- (c) On a veranda
- (d) Outside a school

4. What does the word 'inscrutable' mean?

- (a) Having no morals
- (b) Impossible to understand
- (c) Wilfully defiant
- (d) Unbearably ugly

5. What time of day does young Yozo fear the most?

- (a) Bath time
- (b) Schooltime
- (c) Mealtime
- (d) Bedtime

6. Whenever he's asked a question, Yozo's first impulse is to answer what?

- (a) "Fine."
- (b) "I don't know."
- (c) "Nothing."
- (d) "Yes please."

7. What present does Yozo receive from his father?

- (a) A lion mask
- (b) A dragon costume
- (c) Penguin biscuits
- (d) A book of poetry

8. Yozo describes himself as a mischievous...

- (a) Goblin
- (b) Penguin
- (c) Imp
- (d) Pixie

9. Which is the only category for which Yozo does not receive an A on his school report?

- (a) Biology
- (b) Deportment
- (c) Elocution
- (d) Composition

10. Yozo believes women can sniff out his...?

- (a) Loneliness
- (b) Shame
- (c) Secret
- (d) Desires

Understanding and Interpretation

1. Briefly summarise the three photographs of Yozo. What do they show? How does the viewer of the photographs 'see through' the veneer to the truth that lies underneath?
2. Can you list some of Yozo's personality disorders? What problems does he confess to throughout the first notebook?
3. Evaluate Yozo's relationship with his father. What does the interaction surrounding Yozo's gift reveal?
4. What is the importance of 'clowning' to Yozo in the first notebook?
5. What seems to have triggered Yozo's personality disorders? Are there any clues in the first notebook as to the cause of his mental difficulties?

Important Theme: *Disqualified From Being Human*

"I still have no understanding of what makes human beings tick."

The original Japanese title of Ozamu Dazai's novel, *Ningen Shikkaku*, translates as its most important theme: Disqualified from Being Human. As a child, it is implied, Yozo was sexually assaulted by his servants. While Yozo keeps details of this incident to himself, the reader can infer that this incident is the catalyst for the destruction of his autonomy and agency. Throughout the novel, he is unable to stand up for himself, avoids conflict of all kinds, is unable to answer questions or accusations – in short, he represents a paralyzing 'learned helplessness', and cannot do anything in his own interest. This "lack of strength to act", above anything else, is what leads him to imagine he "might already have been disqualified from living among human beings."

In addition to the destruction of his autonomy, Yozo is unable to connect with others on even the most basic level. He lacks any awareness of people's emotions and is completely unable to empathise. "I simply don't understand," he says. "I have not the remotest clue what the nature of extent of my neighbour's woes can be." His lack is so complete that he suspects others can't feel emotions. He asks; "can their griefs really be genuine?" and wonders what they can possibly be thinking about. Yet, at the same time as he dreads the company of others, he also seeks love and approval and finds himself "unable to renounce their society." In order to cope with this contradiction, and his terror at believing he is "so entirely unlike the rest", Yozo decides to adopt the persona of a clown.

As a method of avoiding conflict, Yozo's clownish act works almost too well. He reasons; "as long as I can make them laugh, I'll be all right." He is so afraid of others' anger and disappointment that he demeans himself and makes himself the joke of any situation. Maintaining this façade takes incredible mental effort, but he manages to keep people at just the right distance to be tolerable. His capering elicits the sympathy of his teachers and, helped by his natural intelligence, Yozo gets good grades at school.

Despite these dubious successes, Yozo ultimately leads a life of deception which seals him away from making any genuine connections with other people. Not only does he not fit in with the rest of human society, but he does feel like he constitutes a human being at all. Yozo is, in some indefinable way, fundamentally 'disqualified from the human race.'

Activity

Study the prologue of *No Longer Human* and focus on the narrator's descriptions of the three photographs of Yozo. Write an analytical paragraph in your exercise book about how the prologue **foreshadows** Yozo's disqualification from being human. Challenge yourself to embed and comment on two or three different ways this theme is established.

Share your paragraph with your classmates and ask for feedback on your analytical writing skills.

Discussion Point: *Japanese I-Novels*

No Longer Human is one of Osamu Dazai's two best-known works (the other is *The Setting Sun*), both published in quick succession in 1947 and 1948, both dealing with issues of Japanese society (*No Longer Human* is set before World War II in the 1930s; *The Setting Sun* deals with the aftermath of the war). However, *No Longer Human* is semi-autobiographical; like *Yozo*, Dazai grew up on a country estate and several events in the novel mirror tragic events from Dazai's life, such as his suicide attempts, alcoholism, and relationship troubles (Dazai would leave his wife for his mistress, Tomie Yamazaki, and the two committed suicide together in 1948). The novel is styled in a type of Japanese confessional literature called an I-Novel. Stemming from the 1800s up until the early 20th century, works in this genre include Katai Tayama's *Futon*, and Shimazaki's *The Broken Commandment*. While I-Novels are dressed up in the clothes of 'fiction', they present the author's thoughts and emotions in a raw, unflinching, and direct way.

Have you enjoyed the experience of reading a Japanese I-Novel? Can you describe the style of this kind of writing? What effects does it have on you? What do you like or dislike about it? Have you read other works in this, or a similar, genre? Discuss your experience of reading *No Longer Human* with others and see what they think about this genre of autobiographical fiction.

Novel Study: *Animal Symbolism*

"It is a monkey."

Beginning in the prologue, and developed throughout the first notebook, is the idea that human beings are essentially animalistic in nature. When he observes anger in others, *Yozo* concludes that *"anger makes [people] reveal in flesh human nature in all its horror."* He is petrified of the threat of violence, and compares his fear of people scolding him to, *"when an ox sedately ensconced in a grassy meadow suddenly lashes out with its tail to kill the horsefly."* Clearly, in this metaphor *Yozo* thinks of himself as the horsefly, a buzzing irritant despised by all. To avoid retaliation, he hides within himself and adopts a clownish personality.



Famous manga artist Junji Ito adapted *No Longer Human* in 2018

However, it is clear from the prologue that *Yozo* could not fully succeed in concealing his true nature, which appears to be captured by the camera for the viewer of the three photographs to see. Particularly when looking at the first photo, the narrator uses animalistic descriptions which conveys an image of a feral creature with his *"teeth bared in an ugly smirk"* and a *"freakish"* expression. He concludes that the boy in the picture is more like *"a monkey"* with *"a grinning monkey face."* This foreshadows *Yozo's* later conclusion of being somehow disqualified as a member of the human race.