

# Reinterpretation Of No Longer Human Through Surrealism And Horror

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## Abstract

This paper examines Junji Ito's 2019 manga adaptation of Osamu Dazai's 1948 novel, *No Longer Human*, a hallmark of Japanese literature. The stark difference in medium, genre, and audience has resulted in an adaptation that both captures the essence of *No Longer Human* and distorts the story to be much darker than originally intended. Dazai's frank tone may lend comfort to readers, sometimes distracting one from the dark contents of the story, which include suicide, alcoholism, sexual abuse, and drug addiction. Ito's style is the exact opposite. He aims to disturb, shock, and confuse audiences with his elaborate illustrations of violence, gore, and body horror not present in Dazai's version. Ito's changes to the original plot mainly consist of added plotlines and exaggerated surreal imagery. I will explore how Junji Ito's experience as a renowned horror mangaka shaped his interpretation of the story and the effect that these changes have on the narrative as a whole. Trigger warning: This paper mentions sexual abuse, child abuse, suicide, self-harm, drug abuse, and alcoholism

## 1 Introduction

Since its publication in 1948, *No Longer Human* (「人間失格」 Ningen Shikkaku, lit. "Disqualified as Human") by Osamu Dazai has exponentially increased in popularity, cementing itself as the second best-selling novel in Japanese history. Osamu Dazai, pseudonym of Tsushima Shuji, was born in 1909 in Tokyo, Japan, emerging at the culmination of World War II as an important literary figure of this era [O'B15]. Dazai's writing was dominated by his wry, gloomy tone. However, he also displayed a great affinity for humor and irony. Dazai tended toward the "i-novel", a genre where the persona and life of the author are reflected in their work, even though it is fictional [Lyo81]. At the core of Dazai's work and persona are his fear of life and detrimental consciousness of

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the world [Lyo81]. His repeated attempts to end his own life are mirrored in his creative expression, which explores masochism and self-annihilation, particularly in *Ningen Shikkaku*, or *No Longer Human* [Wol90]. It has become one of Dazai's most renowned works and consists of three fictional notebooks following the life of Oba Yozo, whose pathological fear of human beings has detached him from reality. Dazai and Yozo share the inability to relate to society and believe it is useless to overcome this separation [Bru68]. From birth, they are aware that one is slowly dying from the moment they are born. Dazai and Yozo's experimentations with politics, drugs, alcohol, and sex come from a desire to push the limits of life and perhaps find an escape from feeling excluded from humanity [Orb90]. Through the novel's enduring popularity, *No Longer Human* has been integrated into new media such as manga, animation, and film. Its most well-known adaptation is Junji Ito's manga by the same name. Ito's interpretation of *No Longer Human* was highly anticipated by audiences familiar with Ito's use of body horror, surrealism, and the uncanny. Fans were eager to see how Ito's extensive background in horror manga would lend itself to a story like *No Longer Human*. Ito's adaptation began serialization in Big Comic Original in 2017 and completed its serialization in 2018. In 2019, Viz Media announced the manga's release in English, opening the manga up to a wider audience of English-speaking readers and collectors of Ito's work. Given the different historical contexts and genres, certain questions must be kept in mind. What are the challenges of adapting Dazai's narration to an illustrated medium? Do Dazai and Ito's audiences overlap? How do these audiences differ in regard to expectations? What parts of Dazai's original story are discarded or altered in the adaptation? Much of the scholarship regarding Osamu Dazai and *No Longer Human* centers on its themes of shame, loneliness, and its role in the "i-novel" genre. There are a handful of academic articles about Junji Ito's work, especially his longer stories, such as *Uzumaki*, *Hellstar Remina*, and *Tomie*, mostly exploring the Lovecraftian aspects of his work [Ste22]. However, there is barely any academic literature concerning his adaptation of *No Longer Human*. I aim to contribute to the discussion of *No Longer Human* and its adaptations by exploring how Junji Ito's added plotlines and use of surreal imagery subvert the wry hollowness of Dazai's original story. Ito adds a layer of drama that appeals to his horror audience by providing shock value and disturbing images. By adding tragedies to Yozo's story, Ito utilizes them as leitmotifs throughout his life. Thus, I will first summarize and examine two of the most prominent added plotlines and their impact on the narrative. Then, I will raise a few instances of surrealism in Ito's adaptation and how they interact with the original story. Lastly, I will compare the endings of both stories and what they indicate about the progression of each story.

## 2 Death as a Leitmotif: Setup and Execution

In adapting *No Longer Human*, Junji Ito made several additions to the original story. These added plotlines are often more dramatic and visceral than anything

that occurs in the original. The two that I will highlight require a brief summary as they diverge from the novel. In Osamu Dazai's original story, a young Yozo befriends Takeichi, a boy who is outcasted due to his deformed face and odd appearance [Daz48]. Takeichi is the first person to see through Yozo's clown facade, so Yozo keeps him close to prevent him from telling others about his secret. The two bond over Western art, more specifically, paintings of ghosts, which inspire Yozo to pursue painting. Takeichi fades from the story as Yozo goes on to attend art school. In Junji Ito's adaptation, however, Takeichi suffers a much darker fate. After Takeichi and Yozo bond over art, Yozo lies to Takeichi, telling him that his cousin, Setchan, finds him attractive [Ito19]. Yozo never expected Takeichi to act on this information and thus, had no qualms about pulling this prank. Overcome with joy, Takeichi pens a passionate love letter for Setchan, which he gives to Yozo to deliver. Yozo never delivers the letter but tells Takeichi that Setchan read the letter and was delighted. The next day, Takeichi visits Setchan to confess his feelings, but she pushes him away and scorns him [Ito19]. Setchan is enraged when Takeichi reaches out to her and violently slaps him to keep him away. She turns to Yozo and tells him never to bring Takeichi to their home again, calling him ugly and repulsive. Yozo agrees, and Takeichi silently leaves their home. The following day, he would end his life by slicing his neck open [Ito19].



Figure 1: Page 72 of Ito's adaptation, depicting Takeichi's suicide.

Ito leaves Takeichi's bleeding corpse on display, taking up two large panels on one page. This brutal imagery and sinister plot line are added not only for shock value but also so that Takeichi's corpse can serve as one of the visual manifestations of the misfortunes throughout Yozo's life. Immediately after learning about Takeichi's suicide, Yozo feels a sense of liberation followed by a

wave of joy that no one would ever see through his clown facade again, as the one person who could was now dead. Yozo continues to clown around freely, but Takeichi's corpse appears to torment him, reminding him that he is acting foolishly on purpose and serving as a reminder that his true face is that of a ghost and not a clown [Ito19]. Ito's adaptation also includes another disturbing plotline that continuously haunts Yozo. Not long after Takeichi's death, Yozo breaks his leg while attempting a foolish stunt [Ito19]. He is sent to a hospital to be cared for by his cousins, Setchan, and an older woman referred to as "Sister". Yozo falls in love with Setchan and moves out of the hospital to complete his recovery. While Sister is caring for him, he confesses his love for her [Ito19]. They proceed to have sex but are interrupted by Setchan, who manages to contain her rage. Later, Sister discovers that she is pregnant. As Yozo and Sister rejoice, Setchan emotionlessly enters the room with a knife, chasing down Sister and stabbing her stomach [Ito19].

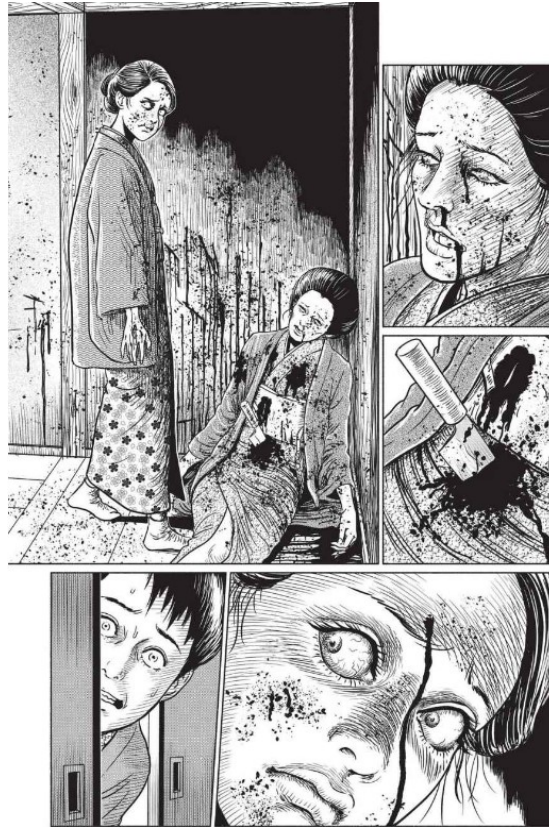


Figure 2: Page 95 of Ito's adaptation, depicting Sister's murder.

When interrogated by police, Setchan never reveals her motive for killing Sister, but it is revealed that she is pregnant with Yozo's child [Ito19]. Nine

months later, Yozo's aunt picks up the baby from the hospital. He is shocked that the baby's face is identical to Takeichi's. Ito's inclusion of these new plot-lines is indicative of his expertise in the horror genre, creating a narrative that is sometimes more in line with horror than Dazai's original story. In Dazai's novel, there is a world of fears hidden beneath his matter-of-fact and wry narration. Ito's interpretation brings Yozo's fears and desires to the surface. The lack of subtlety in Ito's storytelling converts Yozo's mental domain into something much more grotesque. Elements of Dazai's story are contorted under physical modification, such as the blatant, unapologetic display of Sister and Takeichi's dead bodies, which is reminiscent of almost all of Ito's other works. They may even be considered tame compared to Ito's stories which depict corpses in much more gruesome scenes. This imagery is expected from Ito, and the horror audience has come to expect increasing amounts of graphic imagery from his work. Ito's efforts to highlight the tragedy in Yozo's life by contorting the bodies of those around him are more indicative of the horror genre than Dazai's novel but still serve to bring Yozo's mental landscape to the forefront for readers to experience more viscerally.

### 3 Distortion of the Physical and Mental Landscape

Junji Ito is known for his twisted and bold imagery, many of his most iconic characters and panels becoming staples in pop culture. The surreal and bizarre character of these images intrigues and disturbs audiences. Ito employs the same tactics when adapting certain scenes of *No Longer Human*. Ito distorts not only the characters but also the spaces they reside in. When Yozo grows fearful of his wife Yoshiko's paranoia, he flees to the pharmacy seeking the comfort of drugs and the woman working there named Hiroko [Ito19]. The pharmacy's walls are covered in lush, poisonous herbs, creating the illusion that they are made of plants, an element that Ito added to the story.





Figure 3: Page 430 of Ito's adaptation, depicting Hiroko's herb plants.

This extremely different environment draws a sharp contrast to the home Yozo shares with Yoshiko. It also provides a sharp contrast to the other settings; as Yozo is usually in the city, the lush flora is especially distinct. Ito also likens Hiroko's pastime of tending to the plants to an art known as ikebana, the Japanese art of flower arrangement [Ito19]). Ikebana requires participants

to be attentive to nature, balanced, and harmonious. Hiroko's further characterization as a down-to-earth and harmonious person contrasts Yozo's lifestyle of debauchery and addiction. Ito's surrealism culminates in his adaptation of a dream Yozo experiences after attempting to end his own life by overdosing on sleeping pills [Ito19]. As the sleeping pills take hold and Yozo slips out of consciousness, he finds himself adrift in a dark void-like space, weighed down by his misfortunes. Yozo decides to vomit up the misfortunes dwelling inside his soul in order to ascend from the black void [Ito19]. Hundreds of shadowy, blurred faces burst from his mouth and surround him, looking down disapprovingly, symbolizing society, Yozo's first misfortune. As the faces converge upon Yozo, the reader is reminded of the pressures society can induce. The faces dissolve, allowing Yozo to vomit his second misfortune, respect, which manifests in hundreds of smiling faces with blank eyes, all shouting compliments toward him. Among the faces is Takeichi, who reminds Yozo of the deaths he has caused and tells him that he is a gloomy outcast [Ito19]. The smiling faces turn towards Yozo with shock when they hear Takeichi's accusations, and once more, Yozo feels the despair of people losing respect for him. The exaggerated manner in which Yozo dispels the misfortunes from his mouth is indicative of Ito's frequent use of body horror. The hundreds of blank faces, with their jackal-like grins or disapproving glares, provide a sense of uncanniness that is present in much of Ito's work. Both elements are elevated when Yozo vomits his fourth misfortune: women. Unlike the previous misfortunes, Yozo does not just regurgitate their faces but also their nude bodies, which are recognizable as the dozens of women who were once the subjects of his affection. They float around him, reaching out. Ito may have chosen to illustrate their entire bodies to demonstrate the nature of Yozo's relationship with women. While their bodies are fully on display, their faces are glazed over, and their eyes are completely white. Among all these figures, Yozo is the only one drawn in complete detail with the precise pen strokes that Ito is known for. The women are illustrated in pen, but the ink on their hair and the shadows on their bodies is blotted and washed out, lending them a watercolor, dreamlike quality. Unlike society or Yozo's friends, they do not just consist of their intellects and opinions but instead serve as instruments for Yozo's pleasure.



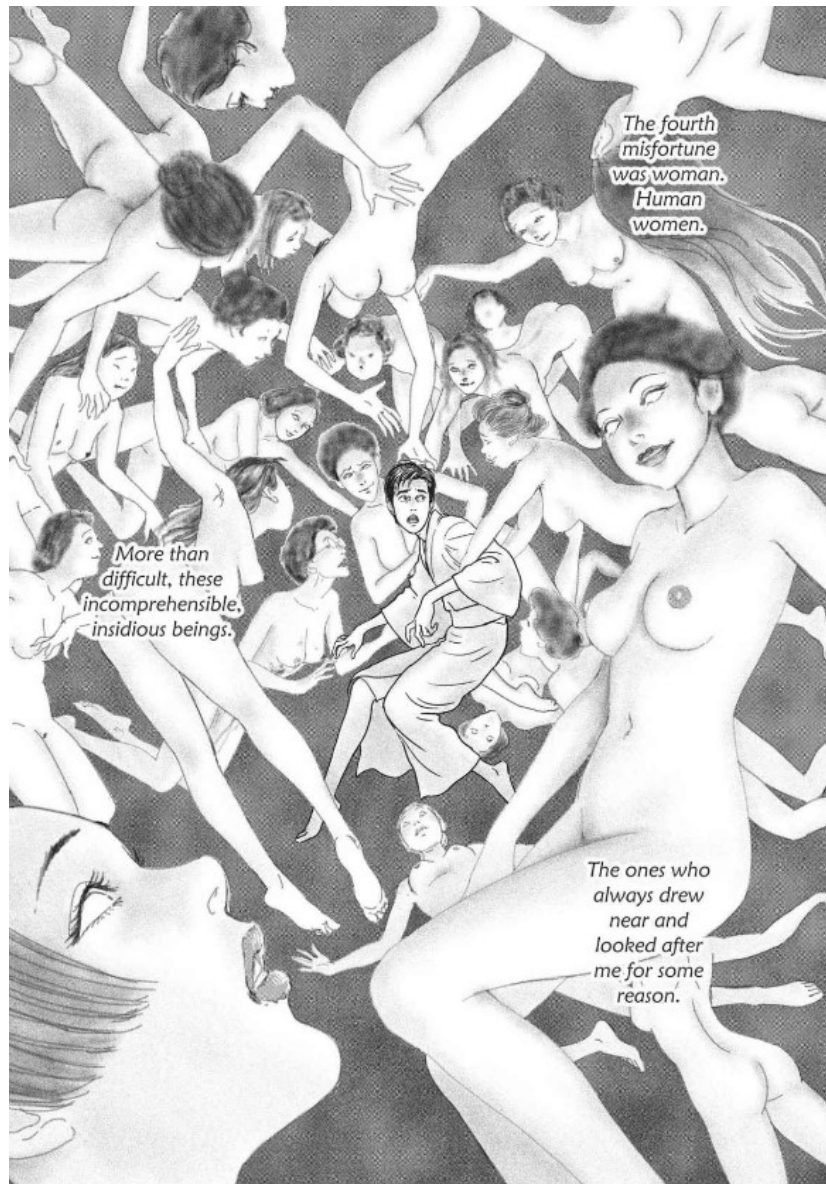


Figure 4: Page 378 of Ito's adaptation, Yozo's hallucination.

This vivid hallucination is not present in Dazai's story, but Yozo's ten misfortunes are mentioned at the beginning of the novel. Yozo believes that if someone else were burdened with even just one of his misfortunes, it would be enough to make them a murderer [Daz48]. Ito does this statement justice by showing how overwhelming and visceral these misfortunes are. By moving the discussion of the ten misfortunes to the climax of the novel, Ito is able to have

Yozo bombarded with reminders of his past. For example, Sister appears with a rotting wound on her stomach. Setchan appears, holding Yozo's baby, who closely resembles Takeichi. Horiki's face appears and taunts Yozo with alcohol. By moving the discussion of the ten misfortunes to the middle of the story, Ito creates an opportunity for readers to be reminded of Yozo's past and watch him relive parts of it that haunt him. Ito's use of surrealism creates a grotesque yet dreamlike environment that contributes to the sensory overload of being confronted with such crushing misfortunes. Ito's portrayal of this scene is heavily indicative of H.P. Lovecraft's influence due to its use of cosmicism and the oneiric. Cosmicism is a literary philosophy created by Lovecraft to establish the absence of a divine presence and that humans are insignificant in the vast realm of existence [Dur16]. Yozo's dream opens with a scene of him drifting in space, a dark vacuum with no beginning or end. Cosmic horror is not only about the absence of God but also the fragility of man. Yozo's fragile mental state has pushed him to overdose on sleeping pills. He is overwhelmed with heaviness and hopelessness but realizes that there is no divine presence coming to his salvation and thus must rely on his own willingness to vomit up his misfortunes in order to ascend. In addition, the hundreds of faces and bodies, the watercolor atmosphere, and the absurd imagery are in every sense oneiric. Dazai's novel never tells readers what these ten misfortunes are, but he contemplates the burden of the misfortunes and how they may affect others, "if my neighbors manage to survive without killing themselves, without going mad, maintaining an interest in political parties, not yielding to despair, resolutely pursuing the fight for existence, can their griefs really be genuine?" [Daz48]. Thus, he realizes that he is completely different from other human beings and decides to keep his misfortunes locked up inside him. Certain that he is separate from the rest of mankind, Yozo decides to become a jester in order to distance himself from others. These locked-up misfortunes fester as Yozo lives out his life as a jester. However, in Ito's adaptation, they burst forth, forcing Yozo to confront each of them.

## 4 The End and Nothingness

Before analyzing the ending of *No Longer Human*, it is important to consider Yozo's experiences with sexual assault throughout his life, as they begin in his childhood and persist to the end. Ito's depiction is extremely different from the start, walking readers through Yozo's horrifying and unsettling experiences with rape as a child. In both works, Yozo's experiences with sexual assault as a child are present. However, Dazai only mentions the events in passing, "I believe that the reason why I did not tell anyone about the loathsome crime perpetrated on me by servants was... because the human beings around me had rigorously sealed me off from the world..." [Daz48]. These instances of rape are also cited as the first time Yozo realized that women could sniff out his loneliness. Ito walks readers through these events, even giving the servants names and personality traits. However, Yozo does not feel isolated by these

events but feels that they enabled him to see another aspect of human nature. While readers are meant to be horrified by Ito's depictions of rape, Yozo himself simply endures it, even finding comfort in being able to see the darkness that dwells in others, perhaps helping his attempts to understand them [Ito19]. Even though Yozo smiles through the abuse, Ito adds another layer of despair as Yozo sympathizes with the sadness that he senses in his abusers. *No Longer Human* also ends with Yozo being regularly sexually abused. However, because the two depictions of Yozo's assault are very different, the endings will also be different. Once again, Dazai's narration is indifferent, whereas Ito's illustration is disturbing. The differences in the endings are evidence of Ito's contributions to the story. The end of Dazai's *No Longer Human* is filled with nothingness. Yozo is discharged from the hospital and relocates to a house on the coast. His brother hires a middle-aged woman to serve as his caretaker. Over the next three years, Yozo's health continues to fluctuate, and he is regularly raped by his caretaker, which he does not try to prevent. He feels neither happiness nor unhappiness. The only truth of human society that Yozo understands is that "Everything passes" [Daz48]. Due to his inability to comprehend other human beings, Yozo concludes that he must be excluded from humanity. The novel ends with Yozo recognizing that he looks much older than his actual age of 27. Ito's story ends with Yozo being discharged from the hospital with Setchan and her son, who he encountered in the hospital. He seeks to start a new life with them, having recovered from his drug addiction.

However, his reality is vastly different. Yozo moves into a run-down home with Setchan, their son, and an old caretaker. Setchan regularly flies into a rage and sexually abuses Yozo for seemingly no reason. Yozo cowers in fear and begs for her mercy but always submits to her violent advances. He is once again a direct victim of sexual assault, not just a victim of the trauma it has caused throughout his life. The scenes of Setchan abusing Yozo are eerily similar to those of the servants abusing Yozo as a child.



Figure 5: Page 604, depicting Setchan's abusive behavior.

Despite this element of drama, Ito still ends the story with nothingness. Yozo sits in a wheelchair at the beach, watching Setchan and his son. The last pieces of narration state, “Now I have neither happiness nor unhappiness. Everything passes” [Ito19]. The last panel shows Yozo looking emaciated with gray hair and empty eyes. Both stories end with Yozo living in a pit of loneliness and are consistent with their respective tones. Dazai concludes Yozo's story with a sense of irony and gloom that is present in the rest of the novel. Ito maintains the element of drama and fear up until the very last page, which provides the moment of stillness that Dazai's story ends on. It is only then that Yozo's placated indifference is clearly stated in Ito's adaptation. Although this is the ending of *No Longer Human*, it is not the ending of Yozo's life. Yozo never addresses the audience, and we never learn how his life really ends. Ito's version is slightly more direct. As readers are able to see Yozo, there are ways for him to interact with us, even if he is not addressing us directly. The very last panel is a full-page spread of Yozo in his wheelchair, facing the audience. His eyes are blank, and it is near impossible to be sure if he is looking at the reader or not. However, the possibility that he could be looking at us gives off the same impression as a character breaking the fourth wall at the end of a sitcom. The characters' lives will go on, but this story has come to an end. Yozo faces the

audience, silently thanks us for our time, and bids us farewell.

## 5 Conclusion

Both editions of *No Longer Human* are vast and sincere. Despite the deceptively short and simple appearance of Dazai's novel, it still offers extensive commentary on the alienation that one can experience when born without the capacity to relate to society. Ito's adaptation is vast, thanks to various additions and distortions. After all, the appeal of Ito's work is its ability to frighten and unsettle. His repackaging of *No Longer Human* into the horror genre allows Yozo's many fears and desires to rise to the surface. Since the 1990s, 40 percent of Japan's printed books and magazines have been manga [Pal14]. Horror manga is dominated by the short story format, giving authors the liberty to produce stories without the burden of developing characters. Japan's rich horror illustrations stem from its saturation of ghost stories and eerie folklore which were lost during cultural upheavals in the 1900s [Pal14]. Illustrators sought to preserve these stories by recording them in manga form. In the 1950s, the gekiga movement birthed a generation of dark and suspenseful stories to turn away from the child-friendly stories of the past. Gekiga stories developed slowly, taking time to flesh out atmospheres, sometimes forgoing dialogue for pages. Ito emerged into the horror manga scene in the 1980s with his short story, *Tomie* [Ber21]. Ito has illustrated several short horror story anthologies and longer manga. One of Ito's dominant creative philosophies is the use of body horror to illustrate the manifestation of the mind. Thus, by emphasizing and distorting figures such as Takeichi and Sister, Ito illustrates that there are elements of *No Longer Human* that (when amplified) lend themselves to a horror rewrite. Characters such as Takeichi and the dozens of women throughout Yozo's life are elevated as figures who repeatedly haunt him. While Ito's manga is not a one-for-one remake of Dazai's novel, it is meant to subvert the wryness of the original and introduce elements of a new medium. In the novel's preface, the translator Donald Keene writes, "Dazai had the creative artistry of a great cameraman... thanks to his brilliant skill in composition and selection... all is sharp, brief, and evocative" [Daz48]. Ito's adaptation examines Dazai frame by frame and dictates which photos and details to elevate or add in order to fit into the horror genre. Ito found the sentence regarding the ten misfortunes and expanded it into a 40-page-long dream sequence. He noticed that the thread of Takeichi's story was left dangling and found a way to weave this thread through the rest of the story meaningfully, using Takeichi's corpse as a reminder that Yozo is not a clown but a ghost. Ito essentially recompiles Dazai's photos into a new album suited for the horror genre, unafraid to add his own images, such as the flora-covered pharmacy walls or the character of Sister. Even the cover of Ito's adaptation, his remix on Dazai's photo album, is covered in images that are the core of *No Longer Human* but never concrete to the reader, such as Yozo's various paintings of ghosts. Without reading the manga, one would not know that these are Yozo's illustrations, but after reading the story, it is clear that

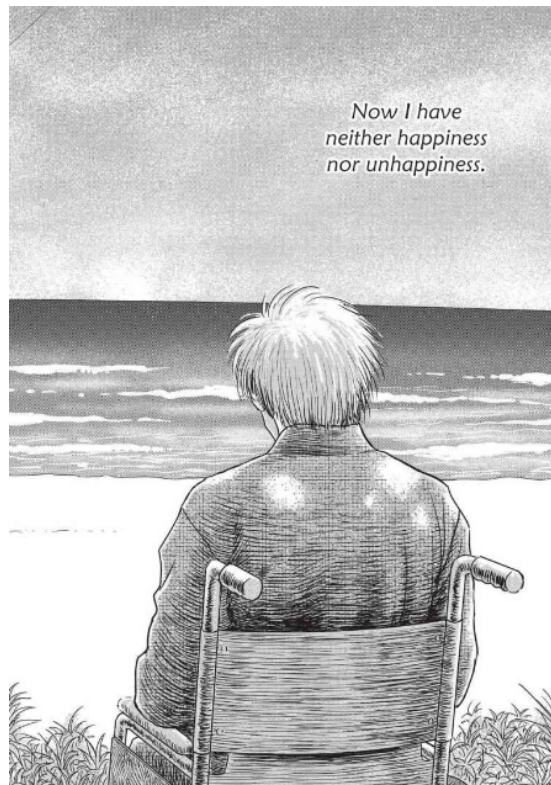


Figure 6: Page 612, showing Yozo at the end of they story, reflecting on his life.

Ito plasters Yozo's innermost despairs onto the cover. Ito makes no effort to hide the anguish in Dazai's story. While Yozo hides his sorrow and ghostliness under a clown facade, Ito warns readers of the darkness they may encounter. Although these two versions have fundamentally different tones and purposes, they end on the same note: nothingness. In Donald Keene's preface, he also notes that Yozo's bad faith prevents him from realizing his own gentleness and capacity for love, whereas most men fail to recognize their cruelty. In the face of tragedy, Ito's Yozo displays a kind of vulnerability that is not explicit in Dazai's narrative. A shallow reading of Dazai's *No Longer Human* may not give off this impression. The most fleeting flip-through of Ito's story gives readers the impression that Yozo is also a victim stuck in the cycle of abuse. This is the nature of Ito's work. A deeper understanding or examination of his work reveals a wealth of intentions and messages, but his glaringly violent and emotional imagery conveys everything a surface-level reader needs to understand the story. In the end, both versions of Yozo are helpless and indifferent, indulging in neither happiness nor unhappiness.



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