

Examining the Intellectual Elitism of the Anti-Hero in *No Longer Human* and *Notes from the Underground*

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Abstract

This paper presents a comparative analysis of Osamu Dazai's *Yozo Oba* from *No Longer Human* and Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Underground Man* from *Notes From the Underground* focusing on the paradoxical relationship between acute self-loathing and intellectual elitism. While both narrators position themselves as 'disqualified' or 'spiteful' outcasts, this study argues that their profound sense of alienation serves as a tool for asserting moral and intellectual superiority over the 'normal' man. By employing a framework of hyper-consciousness and existentialist critique, the research explores how *Yozo's* performative clowning and the *Underground Man's* aggressive isolation function as defenses against a society they perceive as intellectually shallow.

The analysis examines the 'Superfluous Man' archetype in both 19th-century Russia and post-war Japan, illustrating how both authors use the anti-hero to challenge Enlightenment ideals of progress and logic. Ultimately, the paper concludes that for these protagonists, the refusal to participate in the 'human' collective is not a failure of character, but a deliberate, elitist retreat into the sovereignty of the self. This 'aristocracy of misery' suggests that in the modernist tradition, to be "less than human" is, ironically, to be more than the masses.

Keywords: Anti-hero, Hyper-consciousness, Osamu Dazai, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Intellectual Elitism, Alienation

Introduction

When it comes to the narration of a novel, one cannot pinpoint the speaker - it is always an outsider, telling the story of the main protagonists - the 'do-ers' that make things happen. The narrator is the third person - the one character, who is not present in the story, but keeps watching - standing on the periphery of the social circle, observing with a mixture of terror and disdain and never actually taking action. Among the most enduring figures in this lineage are the unnamed narrator of Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* and Yozo Oba, the tragic protagonist of Osamu Dazai's *No Longer Human*. Separated by nearly a century and vastly different cultural landscapes, these two narrators are bound by a shared psychological affliction: hyper-consciousness. For the Underground Man, this takes the form of aggressive spite and a refusal to submit to the laws of nature; whereas for Yozo, it manifests as a desperate, 'clowning' performance designed to mask a fundamental fear of the human species. Although both seem intimidated and scared of society, ultimately, both wanted a space for themselves in it.

The Underground Man keeps to himself, suffering in silence and living in a state of self-imposed exile from a society he finds intellectually shallow, he is driven by spite - not just against others, but against the very laws of logic and nature that suggest human behavior can be rationalized. He serves as the aggressive blueprint for the intellectual elitist - consciously choosing to be a sick and unattractive man because he believes that simple happiness is the province of the stupid.

“I am a sick man... I am a spiteful man. I am an unpleasant man. I think my liver is diseased. However, I don't know beans about my disease, and I am not sure what is bothering me. I don't treat it and never have, though I respect medicine and doctors ... No, I refuse to treat it out of spite. You probably will not understand that ... I know better than anyone that I thereby injure only myself and no one else. But still, if I don't treat it, its is out of spite. My liver is bad, well then-- let it get even worse!” (Dostoevsky, 1864)

Yozo, in comparison, is a character whose intellectual elitism is shrouded in terror rather than the Underground Man's aggression. His hyper-consciousness manifests as a profound ‘fear of human beings,’ whom he views as incomprehensible - too complex and ‘dirty’ for his sensitive and pure soul. Similar to the Underground Man, his intellectual elitism is rooted in his role as a detached observer; perceiving the social rituals of others like eating, working, and small talk as a bizarre, fraudulent performance that he alone is smart enough to see through - or as one could say, an ‘aristocracy of misery’.

“I have always shook with fright before human beings. Unable as I was to feel the least particle of confidence in my ability to speak and act like a human being, I kept my solitary agonies locked in my breast. I kept my melancholy and my agitation hidden, careful lest any trace should be left exposed. I feigned an innocent optimism; I gradually perfected myself in the role of the farcical eccentric.” (Dazai, 1948/1958)

Throughout the novel, we see them create their own battles in their mind, and lose them over and over again. However, beneath their layers of self-loathing and claims of disqualification lies a subtle, pervasive intellectual elitism. These anti-heroes do not merely suffer; they weaponize their suffering to assert a clandestine superiority over the functioning members of society. To them, the ability to thrive in the world is not a virtue, but a symptom of intellectual blindness. This paper will examine how Dazai and Dostoevsky use the anti-hero to subvert traditional notions of heroism, arguing that for Yozo and the Underground Man, the state of being ‘no longer human’ is a self-imposed aristocracy of the mind a tragic belief that to be truly aware is to be inherently, and perhaps proudly, alone.

Discussion

Before comparing Dazai to Dostoevsky, it is important to note that the latter was a major influence on the former’s writing - hence both deal with dark themes and the concept of othering. On a biographical level, both Osamu Dazai and Fyodor Dostoevsky experienced imprisonment, encounters that profoundly shaped their literary engagement with crime, punishment, guilt, and moral responsibility. These themes recur throughout their fiction. In *No Longer Human*, Dazai also explicitly references *Crime and Punishment*, invoking Dostoevsky’s meditation on the nature of crime in order to interrogate the moral ambiguity of transgression and self-condemnation.

Both authors repeatedly explore morality as a psychological and existential burden. Their protagonists often struggle to understand or conform to the ethical frameworks imposed by society, revealing a deep tension between individual consciousness and social codes. Moreover, each writer foregrounds psychologically unstable characters and engages intensely with themes of despair, alienation, and suicide.

Despite these parallels, significant differences distinguish Dazai’s and Dostoevsky’s treatment of suicidal or nihilistic figures.

Dazai's fiction frequently blurs the boundary between autobiography and invention. His protagonists—most notably Yozo in *No Longer Human*—function as near-direct projections of his own psychological struggles. The narrative voice often mirrors Dazai's documented despair, suicide attempts, and profound sense of estrangement. As a result, his novels operate at the intersection of confession and fiction, with self-destruction emerging as an intensely personal, almost inevitable trajectory.

Dostoevsky, by contrast, approaches his most extreme characters as a sympathetic yet analytical observer. Although he drew on his own experiences—imprisonment, gambling addiction, spiritual crisis—he distributed these experiences across a wide range of characters with divergent worldviews.

To analyse the mental state of Yozo Oba and the Underground Man, one must be familiar with the idea of the 'Superfluous Man', or the '*lishny chelovek*' - a Russian concept derived from that of the Byronic Hero. Both of these men are outcasts of society - ones that do not fit into societal norms, are mostly cynical and have a disregard for social values. The Russian radical critic Nikolay Dobrolybov interpreted the figure of the 'superfluous man' as a social product of Russia's system of serfdom, arguing that the institution's rigid class hierarchy and economic stagnation produced an educated but politically powerless elite incapable of meaningful action. Whereas the Byronic Hero archetype came as a Romantic notion - a character quite different from the noble and valiant hero. The difference is that the Byronic Hero is a man of action - one that may flee from society or fight for what he believes in order to change it. The Superfluous Man will remain present in society - complaining, brooding and hollow of any passion.

While the trope originated in the Tsarist Russia of the 1840s as a reaction to political impotence, it found a second life in the *kyodatsu* (state of exhaustion) of post-war Japan. For both Dostoevsky and Dazai, the superfluous man is not merely a "loser" in the modern sense;

he is a fallen elite. His misery is "refined" because it is born of existential boredom and moral disgust rather than material need. After the collapse of traditional Meiji-era values in 1945 of loyalty to the emperor, hierarchy and order, and accountability to the state, young Japanese intellectuals found themselves disqualified from a new, westernized capitalist world that felt alien and fraudulent. In this world, identity was not an individual pursuit but a collective performance. When these traditional pillars collapsed under the weight of post-war Westernization and capitalist individualism, young intellectuals like Dazai were left in a state of psychological vertigo. They found the new world 'fraudulent' because it demanded a self-directed identity that they had never been trained to possess. In withdrawing from the world, and declaring himself 'not human', there was an ease of not performing which Yozo had always had a problem with.

Although throughout the book, his character appears to be meek and passive, meaning no harm to anyone, one could argue that Yozo was an unreliable narrator due to his relationships with women. The unemployed and addicted 'outcast' was able to attract the bar lady who took care of all his expenses, and even convinced innocent girls like Tsuneko to perform *shinjū* (double suicide) with him through the concept of aestheticised vulnerability. By presenting himself as a disqualified human, he taps into a specific type of romanticised pathology - a *puer aeternus* (the eternal boy) - a figure who appears too fragile and "pure" for the crushing reality of post-war Japan. Yozo, who lacks a concrete sense of self, reflects the desires and maternal instincts of the women he encounters. He does not love them as individuals but uses them as a safeguard against the terrifying *seken* (public).

Yozo's success with women is the ultimate proof of his unreliable narration. While he claims to be a 'monster' incapable of human connection, he is actually a master of a specific, pathological intimacy that uses shared misery to create a sanctuary for his own intellectual ego.

In comparison, the Underground Man, in *Part 2: Apropos of the Wet Snow* gets into an argument with his old school friends who he had despised his whole life. There is a whole scene dedicated to him wondering how he would execute his revenge on them after they changed the meet-up time for their friend's farewell and made him feel miserable again - just how he was even during his school days. The reader has an insight to the Underground Man's thinking and all the scenarios he plays in his head wherein he comes out as a victor and punisher of all his wrongdoers: "...as soon as I go in I'll give it to him. Ought I before giving him the slap to say a few words by way of preface? No. I'll simply go in and give it to him... (Dostoevsky, 1864)". Even if he were to get beaten, he believes that he would not fight back and later tell them they were 'not even worth his finger'. The violence in his head is very different from the actions he does, and after all this imagining, he just ends up taking it out on Liza - the prostitute he happens to meet at a brothel. All his frustrations are laid down upon the unsuspecting girl and lectures her about the miserable position her life is at, and upon being received kindly by her, he throws insults at her the next time he visits. Liza's genuine empathy feels like a threat to his cynical world-view, so he must crush her with his intellect and 'book-like' words.

While the anti-hero's relationships with women serve as a private theater for his parasitic or predatory elitism, his disdain for the broader 'human' collective is expressed through a direct critique of the 'man of action.' Having secured a sanctuary in the sacrificial empathy of women, both Yozo and the Underground Man turn their intellectual gaze outward, dissecting the functioning members of society with the detached coldness of a scientist observing a lesser species.

The intellectual elitism of Yozo Oba and the Underground Man is most visible in their shared disdain for the 'normal' person - the one who dares to live. Dostoevsky's narrator famously posits that "*to be overly conscious is a sickness*," yet he simultaneously implies that

those who lack this sickness are essentially sub-human. He describes the 'normal' man as someone who, when faced with a "stone wall" (the laws of logic or nature), simply accepts it and stops. In contrast, the Underground Man views his own paralysis as a mark of sophistication. He argues that the active man is only active because he is "*stupid and narrow-minded*," unable to see the infinite layers of cause and effect that make any action ultimately futile. This is the core of his pride - he may be a 'mouse' hiding in a hole, but he is a mouse who understands the world better than the 'shepherd' who rules it.

In *No Longer Human*, Yozo Oba adopts a similar detachment, viewing the 'normal' people around him as incomprehensible, terrifying aliens. He writes, "*I have always shook with fright before human beings*," yet this fear is rooted in a belief that he is the only one who perceives the 'web of lies' that sustains social interaction. For Yozo, society is a fraudulent performance. His clowning is an intellectual choice - by pretending to be a fool, he maintains a secret, superior thinking only he knows about. As noted by scholar Donald Keene, Dazai's characters often feel a "*fundamental inability to adapt to the common sense of the world*," a failure that they eventually wear as a badge of purity. When Yozo eventually descends into alcoholism and disqualification, it is not merely a tragedy; it is a rejection of the elite expectations of his father. His self-sabotage is an act of autonomy. He would rather be a 'perfect monster' than a fraudulent human.

"I am convinced that human life is filled with many pure, happy, serene examples of insincerity, truly splendid of their kind-of people deceiving one another without (strangely enough) any wounds being inflicted, of people who seem unaware even that they are deceiving one another." (Dazai,

1948/1958)

The Underground Man asks the reader, "*Which is better - cheap happiness, or exalted sufferings?*" and in doing so, he answers his own question. By choosing exalted suffering, both he and Yozo claim a seat in an aristocracy of the mind, where the disqualified are the only ones truly awake.

The transition of the Superfluous Man from the drawing rooms of Turgenev to the basement of Dostoevsky and eventually to the bars of Dazai's Tokyo represents a global evolution of the anti-hero - one who views his own social 'uselessness' as proof of a higher, more honest existence.

The final movement in the intellectual elitism of Yozo and the Underground Man is the act of the confession itself. Both texts are presented as private documents - notes or memoranda, yet they are meticulously crafted, revealing a desperate need to be understood by the very society they claim to despise. This creates the 'confessional paradox' - by documenting their own degradation with such brutal, hyper-conscious detail, they assert a final moral superiority. They imply that while the normal man lives a life of unexamined hypocrisy, they alone have the courage to gaze into the abyss of their own nature. As the Underground Man notes, he is only 'carrying to an extreme' what the reader has not dared to carry 'even halfway'.

This sovereignty of the self is achieved only through total isolation. By the end of their respective narratives, both protagonists have successfully purged the 'sincere' from their lives. The Underground Man retreats further into his basement, and Yozo is exiled to a house 'where there is no spring or autumn.' For a traditional hero, this would be a tragic defeat; for the Aristocrat of Misery, it is the only state of purity. They have successfully 'disqualified' themselves from a fraudulent world, choosing instead a life of 'exalted suffering' where they are the sole judges of their own existence. In this light, their failure is not a lack of ability, but a refusal to compromise.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the parallel between Dostoevsky's 19th-century Russia and Dazai's post-war Japan reveals a universal trajectory for the modern anti-hero. Through the framework of the Superfluous Man, both authors demonstrate that intellectual elitism and self-loathing are two sides of the same coin. Whether through the aggressive spite of the Underground Man or the passive "clowning" of Yozo Oba, these characters weaponize their alienation to survive a society that offers them no place. Their "aristocracy of misery" suggests that in a world built on "splendid examples of insincerity," to be "less than human" is the only way to remain authentically, albeit tragically, awake.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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