

From Rodion and Ivan to Fyodor: Understanding characterization in *Bungo Stray Dogs* using Polyphony

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Abstract

The timelessness of Dostoevsky's work is seen through Asagiri's interpretation of Ivan and Fyodor in his character Fyodor. The aim is to understand the characterization and the underlying guilt of Rodion, Ivan and Fyodor as they mirror each other. This is achieved through the theory of polyphony in Mikhail Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Rodion, Ivan and Fyodor suffer from their conscience because of the polyphony present within them. This is then used to analyse the motivation that drives Fyodor to erase abilities from the *Bungo Stray Dogs* Universe. The three texts, *Crime and Punishment*, *The Brothers Karamazov* and *Bungo Stray Dogs* are analysed in the paper. The article brings out the paradoxical nature of the characters and the ways in which they had tried or had been trying to reduce their internal anguish.

Keywords: *Fyodor, Ivan, Rodion, Dostoevsky, consciousness, polyphony.*

The objective of the research is to understand the portrayal of Rodion Raskolnikov, Ivan Karamazov and Fyodor Dostoevsky to understand how Kafka Asagiri characterises Fyodor based on Bakhtin's theory of polyphony and heteroglossia, and twisted it to fit his narrative. The paper explores the characterization of Fyodor and connection between the three characters. Their character exploration is done with reference to Mikhail Bakhtin's *The Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* through the concept of polyphony. The impact of classic literature on contemporary literature, particularly in the manga format is understood. Different forms a character can take from one generation to another based on the time and understanding of the author is also understood during the research process. This paves the path to understand the different interpretations a singular character takes and creates space for newer interpretations.

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We will be referring to the characters by their first names so that the confusion between Fyodor Dostoevsky, the author of the classic texts, and Fyodor Dostoevsky, the character from *Bungo Stray Dogs*, is resolved.

Introduction to The Texts

Bungo Stray Dogs is a manga written by Kafka Asagiri with illustrations by Sango Harukawa that started its serialization in 2012 in *Young Ace*. It has an anime adaption by Studio Bones, airing since 2016. Atsushi Nakajima, an orphan abandoned by his orphanage on the verge of death, tries to find a shelter and came across a very interesting duo from the famous “Armed Detective Agency” in Yokohama as they search for a white tiger which has been creating havoc in the city. This meeting enabled him to be recruited in the agency where he is sent on missions to keep the “Port Mafia” in check. However, what sets this work apart, and also makes it intriguing to research upon, is the fact that the main characters involved in the plot are named after classic authors, while their abilities and personalities are based on their famous literary works.

One of them is Fyodor Dostoevsky, the main antagonist of the story, based upon the author Fyodor Dostoevsky’s famous psychological murder fiction *Crime and Punishment*. *Crime and Punishment* revolves around the story of Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov, a dropped-out law student who ventured out to commit murder of the blood sucking pawn broker. The novel grapples around the psychophysiological anguish one goes through after committing a crime, with speculations on spirituality and philosophy.

However, the real inspiration behind the characterization of Asagiri’s Fyodor is Ivan Karamazov from Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. *The Brothers Karamazov* is the culmination of all the themes Dostoevsky is known for; complex relationships, existence of God, meaning in life and a courtroom drama. Ivan Karamazov is a 24-year-old intellectual according to whom ‘everything was permitted’ in the world. In the novel, he was seen struggling with his personal moral dilemmas while he was caught between his guilt for being ‘an accomplice’ in his father’s murder and the existence of God.

In an interview with Don for Crunchyroll, Asagiri stated that he uses certain scenes and incidents from the authors’ works or real life for the characterization of the characters in his manga. Asagiri opened up about the conceptualization of Fyodor based on Ivan Karamazov:

I draw inspiration not only from the author themselves, but also from their works. I like to look at particular scenes from those works of literature to then come up with the character [for my story]. For example, if we take Fyodor and look at this character, he is completely different [than the real-life author]. He has absolutely no similarities to Dostoevsky. I took inspiration from Dostoevsky's book, *The Brothers Karamazov*, in which there is a scene where Ivan has a conversation with the devil. I based Fyodor off of this (Don).

Since the characters are based on classic literary pieces, it piqued one's interest to understand how the author personalized and introduced these characters in his own narrative. Fyodor from *Bungo Stray Dogs* was in Yokohama searching for 'the book' which has the power to make whatever written in it, a reality. He wanted to use it to erase the 'curse of abilities from the world'.

In this paper, an attempt is made to explore Rodion's and Ivan's story to discover the Asagiri's interpretation, that serves as a foundation for his own character, Fyodor. This sets up a mirror for Rodion and Ivan in him. One recurring trait in these three characters is their will to commit homicide, all of them had either committed or had thought of committing murder at one or the other point in their respective narratives. Dostoevsky's characterization technique is understood first which led the way to understand the bubbling guilt present within the characters. This is then used to understand Fyodor's characterization and his motives in *Bungo Stray Dogs*.

Exploring Their Response to The Murders Through Bakhtin's Polyphony

The characters are often portrayed having a conversation with themselves or a vision that only they were able to see and hear. This is enhanced in the character of Fyodor where his ability fuses the personalities of the people who had tried to assassinate him in the past within him. Asagiri uses what Bakhtin described as polyphony, and personified the heteroglossia, present in Dostoevsky's novels as Fyodor's ability, *Crime and Punishment*. This leads to a chaotic presence of multiple consciousness within Fyodor.

Through Bakhtin's introductory chapter of his book, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, as he described the inability of previous critics to interpret the multiplicity of consciousness' present within Dostoevsky's work which downplayed the genius of the author. He presented these misinterpretations in a new light by examining the polyphonic nature of Dostoevsky's work and the ways in which poetics worked in his novels.

In actual fact, the utterly incompatible elements comprising Dostoevsky's material are distributed among several worlds and several autonomous consciousnesses; they are presented not within a single field of vision but within several fields of vision, each full and of equal worth; and it is not the material directly but these worlds, their consciousnesses with their individual fields of vision that combine in a higher unity, a unity, so to speak, of the second order, the unity of a polyphonic novel. (Bakhtin, 16)

The autonomous consciousness that Bakhtin mentioned in the above paragraph would be used to analyse selected scenes from the texts. The scenes from *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov* are chosen on the basis of their parallel nature to the manga. As Asagiri has mentioned in the interview, the major influence for Fyodor was Ivan; however, one can also feel the influence of Rodion's character due to Fyodor's ability's name being '*Crime and Punishment*'.

In Chapter 114, Resurrection, of *Bungo Stray Dogs*, Fyodor's ability is revealed to the readers, fusion of his being with his assassins as the culmination of the literary techniques employed by Dostoevsky into Fyodor's ability. Previously he has been revealed to evade death by either showcasing his touch as lethal or by using mental strategies to get out of fatal situations in the narrative in the previous chapters. When Asagiri finally reveals Fyodor's ability, one can see the genius of the author.

However, it is also necessary to understand how he keeps this secret all these years. The ways through which Fyodor navigated to keep it a secret is understood in Chapter 42 Sins Granted by the Hand of God. When Fyodor has a conversation with Karma, one of Ace's undermans, he comments that his ability is related to space and consciousness manipulation; however, by the end of the chapter when Karma enquired about his win against Ace, he clarifies that he had purposefully shared the information to mislead Ace. "The method of escape the kidnapper told him was to "eliminate your own consciousness from the mind space." But that piece of data was something I gave the kidnapper on purpose." (Asagiri).

In *Crime and Punishment*, Chapter 6, Part 3 when Razumihin enquires about Rodion's reasons for speaking against himself as they left Porfiry's office, Rodion answers:

Because only peasants, or the most inexperienced novices deny everything flatly at examinations. If a man is ever so little developed and experienced, he will certainly try to admit all the external facts that

can't be avoided, but will seek other explanations of them, will introduce some special, unexpected turn, that will give them another significance and put them in another light. (Dostoevsky, 270)

Thus, Fyodor uses the same technique Rodion mentions above. He accepts the fact that his ability is related to consciousness but introduces an unexpected turn, space manipulation, within his ability. This isn't the only instance which is inspired from *Crime and Punishment*.

The name of Chapter 42, The Sin Granted by the Hands of God, referred to the extraordinary people Rodion mentioned in his conversation at Porfiry's. Rodion has published the paper "On Crime", theorizing the presence of a group of people who are allowed to transgress ordinary laws. Ivan also propagated a similar notion; he questioned the existence of a loving God and discussed the burden of freedom of conscience. He presents the paradox of freedom of conscience which actually became a burden to humans who are restricted in the three-dimensional space of mortality.

According to Kimberly Young's essay, Ivan Karamazov's Euclidean Mind: the 'Fact' of Human Suffering and Evil, mentions Dostoevsky's characters like Ivan and Rodion who went unstable on their path to be extraordinary because they desired to escape the limitation of being the ordinary humans. They desired to reach the dimension where 'everything is permitted'. Fyodor in the manga chapter referred earlier mused "...thinking is a crime. Breathing is a crime. Now he has been freed from all that". According to Fyodor, the flesh of a human being is definite and the moral conscience which one had to deal with is burdensome. Although some people were able to go out of their way as they stuck to facts and were exempted from the metaphysical burden of their guilt according to the characters.

However, by the end of *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov* both the characters, Rodion and Ivan, are unable to handle the weight of being accused as murderers. They try to suppress their conscience and stick with the rational and material but sooner or later, both were struck down towards delirium as they tried to reason out their motivation for it. They fall sick, questioning the foundation of their ideologies. Rodion oscillates between thinking he is an extraordinary person or an ordinary one. Meanwhile, Ivan proposes the idea of ecclesiastic courts but does not believe in God's existence. Fyodor considers himself as a God-like figure but he himself is in the pursuit of erasing abilities. This can indicate his motive to get rid of the polyphony due to his ability, leading to his loss of being a demigod/immortal

in the *Bungo Stray Dogs* universe. The want to change the course of reality in *Bungo Stray Dogs* shows his desperation to end his psychological misery.

Ervin C. Brody in his article, Meaning and Symbolism in the names of Dostoevsky, mentions that Dostoevsky used to names his characters to portray their personality's essence or the complete opposite of it (Brody, 121). The name Raskolnikov is derived from 'raskol' which means schismatic, dissident and heretic. When it is further broken into the prefix 'ras-' and the root word 'kolot' which means to break or to split (Brody, 121). This plays a huge role in his portrayal to show the presence of two distinct consciousness. Rodion is struggling between the guilt of the two murders while defending his ideology. This is amplified as two different voices numerous times. In connection with Fyodor, it personalizes through the split between him and his ability during the fog in *Dead Apple*. He laughs as he says "Crime and Punishment are very close friends" while addressing Dazai (Chapter 5, Asagiri). This showcases the psychological split present within Fyodor's personality that he is unable to get rid of.

Another instance of parallelism with the face off would Ivan's conversation with the 'devil'. The light novel *Bungo Stray Dogs: Dead Apple*, replicated Chapter 9, Ivan's Nightmare and the Devil, from book XI, of *The Brothers Karamazov*. Ivan sits face to face with the gentleman, who he deemed as the devil, and confronted him about his guilt. The gentleman stands as the personification of Ivan's conscience and was parallel to the iconic scene of Fyodor standing back-to-back with his ability. The ability is personified as 'punishment', while he called himself 'crime', during the fog. On the other hand, it also paralleled the hallucinatory character of 'the devil' present in *Crime and Punishment*. In *Bungo Stray Dogs*, the character Osamu Dazai, addresses Fyodor as 'devil'. This may imply the existence of another conscious within Fyodor.

When it comes to character design, Rodion and Fyodor are represented in shabby setting and dressing. One's fashion plays a huge role in both the texts representing the characters mental state and ideologies. In Chapter 1, Part I, Dostoevsky writes "he was so badly dressed that even a man accustomed to shabbiness would have been ashamed to be seen in the street in such rags" (Dostoevsky, 2). His attire is shabby throughout the narrative similar to Fyodor in *Bungo Stray Dogs*. However, Fyodor wears an Ushanka instead of the Zimmerman's hat Rodion owns. Their rooms are depicted as cluttered, dusty and chaotic similar to their state of mind. The constant run from police, the society and the guilt.

When Ivan talks to Father Zosima in Book II, Chapter 5, he affirms that a man can change in front of the law of Christ. He says "...if anything can reform the criminal and make a new man out of him, it is only by the lay of Christ, which manifests itself in the awareness of a man's own conscience" (Dostoevsky, 81). Similarly, Rodion in Part III, Chapter 5, states "If he has a conscience he will suffer for his mistake. That will be his punishment— as well as the prison" (Dostoevsky, 265). Their act of murder nullifies this ideology and they are hit with the sudden wave of guilt.

In the interview with Crunchyroll, Asagiri had also mentioned about using Anton Chekhov's Gun as his writing technique, but adds that he twisted it. When taken in terms of Ivan's conversation with the devil or his conscience, it showcased the twist Asagiri mentioned. By the end of the conversation, Ivan's devil asked that if an individual has already accepted himself as the demigod in a godless world, as the modern Russian man claims it to be, making everything permissible, why does he "still need the stamp of righteousness?" (Dostoevsky, 871) This question would be in line with the main theme of *Crime and Punishment*, the necessity to be considered right based on the intent and not the act, like that of a prophet. When Rodion confessed about the murders to Sonya he shouted that it was the devil who killed them and not him, unable to bear the ownership of his crime (Dostoevsky, 415).

Fyodor's ability is to assimilate the person who killed him or tried to kill him within his consciousness. This enables him to carry on his legacy to cleanse the *Bungo Stray Dogs* universe of ability users. In a way, it grants him immortality enabling him continue living, as he absorbs the psyche of the person who attempted to kill him. When Bakhtin described the polyphony of Dostoevsky's character, he explains it as the absorption of multiple consciousness into an object itself which led to the interaction between these differences standing on their own within the object, "...a whole formed by the interaction of several consciousnesses" (Bakhtin, 18). This showcases how Asagiri had not only understood the polyphony of Dostoevsky's characters but had also used Chekhov's Gun to twist it to lead his narrative.

Furthermore, it led to the question: why would Fyodor want to erase abilities when his ability would grant him the capacity to rule the world under his command, the One Order, Decay of Angels had been working for? One would assume Fyodor wants to get rid of the abilities so that he could cease to exist, that he could get away from his own ability. The devil which had

been residing somewhere in his barrage of consciousness, and not to clean the world of violent abilities. This can only be assumed as Asagiri had not given any hints about Fyodor's personal feelings in the manga. Also, the Decay of Angels would signify the decay of the ideology the group started with; the angels that they considered themselves to be like Ivan and Rodion. If this is actually the case, it would be Asagiri's climactic gunshot towards the finale of *Bungo Stray Dogs*.

An ordinary man wouldn't be able to handle the burden of murder unlike the extraordinary one, that's also the reason Ivan, when accused of leading Pavel to kill their father, couldn't handle the burden of being an accomplice. At the same time, Rodion starts to descend into madness as he confesses to Sonya about the murders. Nevertheless, Rodion mentions in his conversation of ordinary and extraordinary men, "pain and suffering are always inevitable for a large intelligence and deep heart. The really great men must, I think, have great sadness on earth" (Dostoevsky, 265). This creates the paradox, they think the extraordinary cannot feel guilty but these characters, considered intelligent by their counterparts end up feeling worse. The characters who are initially confident in their autonomy over their actions are seen crumbling under the weight of their actions by the end of the act. The actions they considered permissible. This oscillation between the good and evil manifests into the polyphony of their mental mindscape.

For the same reason, Kohlberg in the paper, Psychological Analysis and Literary Form: A Study of the Doubles in Dostoevsky, the characters' consciousness in Dostoevsky's novels are not spilt into multiple personalities or showcased the symptom of schizophrenia but was the presence of a force, "...an obsessive balancing or undoing of one idea or force with its opposite" (Kohlberg, 352). The article mentions the presence of doubles in the conscious as he quotes the protagonist of Notes from Underground by Dostoevsky, "At the very moment when I am most capable of feeling every refinement of all that is good and beautiful it would, as though by design, happen to me not only to feel, but to do, such ugly things" (Kohlberg, 352).

The simple answer to Rodion's reasoning to kill the pawnbroker would be to get the money so that he can build his career as a lawyer and save his family from poverty. Ivan on the other hand wanted to kill his father because he was a burden, caused troubles and chaos for the brothers. In all the three cases, the victims according to the characters are burdens in society and the world would be a better place without them. However, the conscience within Ivan and

Rodion is to save and help the people around, that is their instinct. This leads to the guilt weighing their utilitarian ideology down in the form of physical ailment. Fyodor kills in order to create a world free of ‘abilities’ in the manga universe. His sickly appearance can be the result of the centuries long guilt of killing people in the pursuit of achieving his ultimate goal. Another way of Asagiri depicting Fyodor’s polyphony in the manga format as he adapts the physical sickness Ivan and Rodion suffered from.

As it has been noted, the statement given by Rodion and the motivation Fyodor had given in the manga, we can conclude his primitive motive. Fyodor, as a single identity, has been burdened due to the multiple consciousnesses present within his body. The conflict within the polyphony of these voices drove him to want to erase abilities from the *Bungo Stray Dogs* universe. This motive gives him the space or reason to avoid the polyphony within him and help him end his misery. In the end, he would be able to erase his own ability. Fyodor lives on with his killers, the polyphony in his mind, as he makes them an accomplice in his goal. This make him the extraordinary person Rodion wanted to become and the demigod Ivan propagated. The polyphony is depicted as the ability, *Crime and Punishment*, that Fyodor addresses as his close friend (Asagiri, Chapter 5).

Conclusion

The motives and characterization techniques used by Asagiri are explored and understood using Bakhtin’s analysis of Dostoevsky’s poetics and Chekov’s literary technique. It also brought out the timelessness of Dostoevsky’s writing and Asagiri's interpretation of the two characters, Rodion and Ivan. Although Asagiri cites Ivan as his main inspiration for Fyodor, Rodion’s influence cannot be neglected. The philosophy of Dostoevsky’s moral dilemma towards God and moral conscience based on which it is formulated that Fyodor might be motivated to erase the abilities to end his internal anguish and immortality of his life. In the end, “the interaction of several unmerged consciousnesses was replaced by an interrelationship of ideas, thoughts and attitudes gravitating toward a single consciousness” is the main idea behind the characterization of Fyodor and his ability ‘*Crime and Punishment*’ (Bakhtin, 9). We conclude that Asagiri uses the most basic poetics of Dostoevsky’s work to characterize Fyodor and twists it to fit his narrative as he integrates the character in his story.

Bungo Stray Dogs universe consisted of various characters based on authors and their works, this made the research limited as every character would be characterized differently based on

its inspiration. It is hoped that this paper would push researchers to explore the characterization of other characters who are based on essays, poems and biographical aspects from the author's life they were named upon. The research also aims to encourage other scholars to explore the intricate world of *Bungo Stray Dogs* and appreciate the effort Kafka Asagiri has put into its creation.

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