

The Influence of Trauma on Nakajima Atsushi's Character Development In *Bungo Stray Dogs*

Afitra Devi

English Literature, Faculty of Languages and Arts, Universitas Negeri Surabaya

afitradevi.21061@mhs.unesa.ac.id

Abstrak

Penelitian ini menganalisis representasi trauma dalam perkembangan karakter Nakajima Atsushi dalam *Bungo Stray Dogs* dengan menggunakan teori trauma Cathy Caruth. Trauma dipahami bukan sekadar pengalaman menyakitkan, tetapi sebagai peristiwa yang sulit dipahami saat terjadi dan kemudian muncul kembali melalui kilas balik serta luka emosional yang berulang. Hasilnya menunjukkan bahwa trauma masa kecil Atsushi memengaruhi cara ia memandang diri, berhubungan dengan orang lain, dan mengambil keputusan, meskipun pada akhirnya ia mulai menerima masa lalunya dan berkembang menuju ketahanan serta pemahaman diri yang lebih baik.

Kata Kunci: trauma, kilas balik, halusinasi, trauma masa kanak-kanak, pelecehan verbal

Abstract

This study analyzes the representation of trauma in Nakajima Atsushi's character development in *Bungo Stray Dogs* using trauma theory proposed by Cathy Caruth. Trauma is understood not merely as a painful event, but as an experience that cannot be fully comprehended at the moment it occurs and later returns through flashbacks and recurring emotional wounds. The findings reveal that Atsushi's childhood trauma influences his self-perception, relationships with others, and decision-making, although over time he begins to accept his past and gradually develops resilience and deeper self-understanding.

Keywords: trauma, flashback, hallucination, childhood trauma, verbal abuse

INTRODUCTION

Trauma plays a crucial role in shaping an individual's mindset, behavior, and character development. It is not merely a painful emotional or physical wound, but often becomes a turning point that influences how a person lives their life. Trauma is defined as an emotional and psychological response to negative experiences that may disrupt normal functioning and require assistance for recovery (Starcevic, 2019). In literary studies, trauma has become an important element for representing complex human experiences that are difficult to express directly (Abubakar, 2017). Originally rooted in psychology, trauma has developed into a critical approach in literary analysis, offering deeper insight into character construction, including in anime narratives. Through techniques such as flashbacks, anime is able to visualize how past suffering continues to affect characters in the present.

Flashbacks are frequently used in literature and film to depict how traumatic memories persist. According to Wang et al. (2019) in *Mechanisms of the Formation and Involuntary Repetition of Trauma-Related Flashbacks*, flashbacks are not simple recollections but intense re-experiences in which individuals relive sensations and emotions as if the event were occurring again. They argue that traumatic memories are stored in fragmented forms because the brain fails to process them properly, causing them to resurface unexpectedly. In addition to flashbacks, trauma may also be linked to hallucinations. Wickham et al. (2016) in *Are Specific Early-Life Adversities Associated with Specific Symptoms of Psychosis?* explain that hallucinations are sensory experiences without external stimuli yet perceived as

real, and they can be associated with childhood trauma. However, responses to trauma vary. Muldoon et al. (2020) in *The Social Psychology of Responses to Trauma* state that individuals who maintain or reconstruct a social identity after trauma tend to demonstrate resilience and even post-traumatic growth, while those who perceive trauma as identity disruption are more vulnerable to negative psychological outcomes.

Anime is selected as the research object because it is a visual medium rich in symbolic and emotional expression. Cho et al. (2018) define anime as Japanese animation with distinctive visual and thematic characteristics. Cai (2024) in *The Emotional Impact of Animation on Its Audience* states that, "The interplay between animation and psychological mechanisms can evoke a variety of emotional responses, while psychological mechanisms endow animated works with emotional appeal and immersive qualities." This highlights how animation effectively conveys psychological depth through visuals, sound, and narrative. In *Bungo Stray Dogs*, trauma is often presented visually through flashbacks and emotional color symbolism rather than explicit dialogue.

Bungo Stray Dogs, created by Kafka Asagiri, follows Nakajima Atsushi, a former orphan who joins the Armed Detective Agency after experiencing abuse and rejection. The series portrays characters such as Atsushi, Dazai Osamu, and Akutagawa Ryunosuke as individuals shaped by traumatic pasts that influence their personalities and decisions. The anime has received critical recognition, including the Favorite Supernatural award in 2023 and nominations for Mystery or

Psychological Anime of the Year on IMDb since 2017, reflecting its cultural impact in presenting complex psychological themes.

Previous studies have explored trauma in anime, such as Kurnia (2018) on *Your Lie in April* and Devianti et al. (2025) on *Mononoke*, focusing on trauma representation through psychological and symbolic approaches. Research on *Bungo Stray Dogs* has examined visual design (Rizqina et al., 2023) and linguistic aspects (Permata & Arianingsih, 2022), but none specifically analyze trauma representation in the series. Meanwhile, studies applying Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, such as Sari & Heriyati (2021), Hardianti (2022), and Fadilah (2024), demonstrate that trauma in narratives is often expressed through flashbacks, fragmented memories, and prolonged psychological distress.

Based on this review, although Caruth's trauma theory has been widely applied in literary and film studies, no research has specifically examined trauma representation in *Bungo Stray Dogs*. Therefore, this study aims to fill that gap by analyzing how trauma is represented in the anime and how it shapes the main character's development.

METHOD

This study applies the close watching technique to analyze trauma representation in *Bungo Stray Dogs*, focusing on Seasons 1–3 as the primary data source. The data consist of dialogues and visual elements, such as screenshots of flashbacks, character expressions, and camera angles that depict Nakajima Atsushi's traumatic experiences and development. Data are collected through in-depth observation, identifying scenes that reflect trauma based on Cathy Caruth's concepts of belatedness, repetition compulsion, and the wound that speaks, with flashbacks understood as backward narrative structures (Nurgiyantoro, 2010, as cited in Tanjung & Manesah, 2025). The analysis employs the T-E-E-L method (Topic, Evidence, Elaboration, Link) to systematically interpret how narrative and visual techniques represent trauma and how these experiences shape the character's psychological growth.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the findings of the analysis on the representation of trauma in Nakajima Atsushi's character development in *Bungo Stray Dogs* through the lens of Cathy Caruth's trauma theory. The discussion is organized into two subsections corresponding to the research questions. Subsection 3.1 examines how Atsushi's trauma is portrayed in the narrative, addressing the first research question. Subsection 3.2 explores how these traumatic experiences shape his mindset and behavior, responding to the second research question. Each section is supported by selected scenes, dialogues, and visual elements that highlight the depiction of trauma in the main character.

Portrayal of Nakajima Atsushi's Trauma in *Bungo Stray Dogs* Anime Series

Nakajima Atsushi is the main character in the anime series *Bungo Stray Dogs*, an orphaned young man with a traumatic past due to verbal abuse and neglect while living in an orphanage. Atsushi Nakajima is described as an 18-year-old young man with a slim build and average height. He has short, light gray hair that is slightly messy, with bangs that hang down over his eyes. One of Atsushi's most distinctive features is the bandage wrapped around his body, as he has numerous scars from childhood trauma. His eyes are lavender gray in color. He wears a white long-sleeved shirt, a loose black tie, black knee-length pants with suspenders, and boots. He is portrayed as a character who often feels useless and lives in the shadow of guilt and rejection. After being expelled from the orphanage, his life changes when he joins the Armed Detective Agency, an organization where members possess supernatural abilities. Atsushi has the ability to transform into a white tiger with superhuman strength. Throughout the story, his childhood trauma continues to influence his self-perception and view of others, shaping how he interacts with other characters.



Figure 1. Atsushi's flashback in *Yokohama City* (ep1 s1 01.190)

One of the earliest portrayals of Atsushi's trauma is presented in Season 1 Episode 1, where his painful experiences at the orphanage are introduced. This scene illustrates the verbal abuse and rejection he endured, which became the foundation of his psychological trauma. In Season 1 Episode 1 (01:22) of *Bungo Stray Dogs*, Atsushi is shown kneeling between two large shadows symbolizing the orphanage guards while hearing the harsh words, "Get out, you failure!" and "No orphanage would ever welcome the likes of you! The world would be a better place if you'd just die in a ditch somewhere!" These statements represent repeated verbal abuse that shapes Atsushi's self-perception as worthless and unwanted. Over time, he internalizes these messages, leading to self-doubt, hesitation, and a constant need for validation. This condition reflects Cathy Caruth's (1996) concepts of the wound that speaks, where trauma continues to echo through memory and behavior, and belatedness, in which painful experiences resurface later without being fully processed. Visually, the low-angle shot emphasizes Atsushi's powerlessness, while the purple and bluish tones symbolize psychological oppression, instability, and the lingering atmosphere of

trauma.

Atsushi's trauma resurfaced when he wanted to protect his friends. However, his doubts returned when the voices and shadows of the orphanage headmaster haunted him again. "What could someone like you protect?" implies the humiliation Atsushi suffered as a child. The phrase "someone like you" reflects contempt, as if Atsushi's former identity as an orphan, a wild creature, and an unwanted person makes him unfit to be anyone's protector. Those words are traumatic memories embedded in his mind as a result of the harsh treatment he received from the orphanage headmaster.

Still in the same episode, Atsushi's ethics are influenced by his opponent's power and he almost hurts his friend, and the shadow of the orphanage headmaster reappears. The voice of the orphanage headmaster once again proclaimed that Atsushi was a monster, someone who could not be trusted with power. "Your nature of being consumed by power and hurting others will never change." emphasizes that trauma shaped his identity into someone who is useless and irreparable. This made Atsushi think that he was useless and had even hurt his own friends. He began to question whether he deserved to live if he couldn't save his friends. According to Caruth, this reflects repetition compulsion. Trauma does not only appear as memories, but also influences actual behavior in the present. Atsushi becomes hesitant to make decisions and is once again consumed by thoughts that he is a useless human being.

The camera angles down from above, focusing on the headmaster's face as he stares intently at Atsushi. This conveys a sense of psychological dominance that is both demeaning and judgmental, stemming from a position of superiority. The guard's piercing gaze is highly intimidating, emphasizing that he is the one who watches, controls, and never truly leaves. Atsushi's flashbacks are always marked by a palette of dark purple, cold blue, and dim light, typically used to signify dark memories from the past.

This scene appears when Atsushi is given the difficult mission of infiltrating the enemy's aircraft, a huge task that requires courage and confidence. However, just as he is about to make a decision, his old trauma resurfaces in the form of voices and images of the orphanage headmaster belittling him again. "You'll only be orphanage trash until you die." This sentence is a painful insult that directly attacks Atsushi's identity. The derogatory term "orphanage trash" belittles his background and implies that he is completely worthless as a human being. That sentence also shows that Atsushi has absorbed the verbal abuse he used to hear so often. Because those words were repeated over and over for years, they now seem to be stuck in his head and pop up whenever he feels inadequate.

The voice of the orphanage headmaster haunts Atsushi even today. This reflects Cathy Caruth's concept of "the wound that speaks," which refers to emotional wounds that never truly heal and continue to manifest themselves through negative thoughts, doubts, and fears that recur repeatedly. Additionally, the appearance of the orphanage headmaster's voice during a critical moment

illustrates the concept of belatedness, where the impact of trauma does not immediately manifest at the time of the event but resurfaces in the future in a disruptive form. This trauma causes Atsushi to doubt his own abilities and drags him back to a painful past where he was still powerless to act.

This scene is shot from a slanted overhead angle, giving the impression that the head of the orphanage is mentally oppressing or controlling Atsushi. The orphanage headmaster stands upright and his shadow falls on Atsushi, indicating that he still controls Atsushi's mind. Atsushi himself sits hunched over below, showing the helplessness and low self-esteem he feels when those bad memories resurface. The chair used gives the impression of an interrogation or judgment room, showing that Atsushi is being judged by his own past. The stained glasses background, which resembles a church window and is usually associated with tranquility and forgiveness, feels frightening to Atsushi. The dominant blue and purple colors indicate that all of this is happening in his mind, not in the real world.



Figure 2. Atsushi's head was pushed underwater when he was a kid (ep11 s2 11.00)

Atsushi's trauma is further portrayed through flashbacks that emerge when he confronts his enemy. During this encounter, the enemy states, "You were nearly killed twice in your childhood. When you kicked and cracked your ribs, I hear he said compared to what your own parent did to you as a baby, this stuff doesn't even register as violence." This dialogue reveals that Atsushi had been rejected since infancy by his biological parents, which ultimately led to him being placed in an orphanage. There, he experienced severe physical abuse, including being beaten and having his ribs broken. Tragically, this violence was described as insignificant compared to what he endured as a baby.

As a result, Atsushi internalizes the belief that his existence brings harm to others and that he must prove his worth by saving someone in order to justify his right to live. This depiction aligns with Cathy Caruth's concept of belatedness, which explains that trauma is not fully understood at the moment it occurs but resurfaces later through repetition or flashbacks. In this scene, the guild leader reawakens buried memories that Atsushi himself does not completely remember, illustrating how unresolved childhood trauma continues to shape his identity, emotional responses, and persistent sense of

guilt and worthlessness.

Atsushi's expression reflects intense fear. His eyes widen when he sees the weapon held by the orphanage headmaster, his body shrinks inward, and his hands instinctively rise to shield himself. These reactions indicate that his survival instincts are activated due to repeated exposure to violence in the past. The dominant white-blue tones signal that the scene functions as a flashback, while the high-angle shot focused closely on his face heightens the emotional tension and reinforces his vulnerability.

Atsushi lying on the ground with his body curled up and his face contorted in pain. His hands are clenched and his body is bent. He has resigned himself to his suffering. The dominant purple and gray colors suggest that this scene is part of an old memory stored in his mind, a memory that still haunts him. The camera angle is taken from the side and very close to the ground, reinforcing the impression that Atsushi is at his lowest point. Then there are the guard's feet standing on Atsushi's small body, symbolizing that his dignity and humanity have been completely trampled and degraded. This repeated physical violence became part of a repetition compulsion. Unresolved trauma replayed itself over and over in Atsushi's head, creating a constant feeling that he was not worthy of standing up or fighting back.



Figure 3. Atsushi was terrified because the orphanage headmaster hurt him (ep6 s3 20.31)

Atsushi explicitly acknowledged the pain he experienced during childhood. This statement demonstrates that he is finally able to verbalize the trauma he had endured for years. "I really suffered" (Season 1, Episode 8, 20:31) serves as Atsushi's acknowledgment of the pain he endured during childhood. The emphasis on "really" highlights that the suffering was profound and lasting, not something insignificant or easily forgotten. His admission shows that the trauma continues to affect him whenever those memories resurface. This moment illustrates Caruth's concept of belatedness, in which trauma is expressed long after the original event, as Atsushi was unable to articulate his suffering at the time it occurred.

Atsushi screaming when he was hurt by the orphanage headmaster. As Atsushi recalls the incident, he says, "There's nothing he could do to make me forgive him," meaning that the depth of the wound left by the orphanage headmaster is too great to be forgiven. From Atsushi's previous flashback in figure 1 until figure 10, it

is shown that he was not only physically harmed but also emotionally scarred. He grew up believing that he was worthless, unworthy of life, and would always hurt others. Atsushi's admission that he cannot forgive the orphanage headmaster reveals how trauma leaves a mark as a psychological wound that continues to speak within him. This is in line with Cathy Caruth's concept of the wound that speaks, which refers to trauma as an unresolved wound that continues to voice suffering.

Trauma	Explanation
Trauma of Abandonment	Atsushi experienced abandonment from an early age after being left by his parents and raised in an orphanage. He grew up without a family figure who could provide him with a sense of security and affection, which led to feelings of rejection and unwantedness.
Verbal and Emotional Abuse Trauma	While in the orphanage, Atsushi was often subjected to insults, threats, and harsh treatment from the caregivers, who constantly blamed him for everything bad that happened. This verbal abuse instilled a deep sense of guilt in him.
Trauma of Feeling Worthless	The constant mistreatment made Atsushi view himself as a useless individual and a burden to others. He often questioned his own existence and the value of his life.
Trauma of Fear of Social Rejection	Atsushi exhibits an excessive fear of being rejected or abandoned again, either by individuals or groups. This fear makes him extremely sensitive to the judgements of others.

Based on the analysis, Nakajima Atsushi has suffered from complex psychological trauma since childhood, including abandonment, verbal and emotional abuse, feelings of worthlessness, and fear of social rejection. All of these experiences are interrelated and have shaped his negative mindset. In the anime Bungo Stray Dogs, this trauma is depicted through flashback scenes that appear repeatedly when Atsushi is in stressful situations, showing how memories of the orphanage and the voice of the caretaker continue to haunt him. This representation is in line with Cathy Caruth's theory, which states that trauma is an experience that is not fully understood when it occurs and then returns in the form of repetition or flashbacks. Thus, Atsushi's past trauma is not only the background of the story, but also a major factor that influences his character development and

behavior, which will be discussed further in the next research question.

Mindset and Behavior of Nakajima Atsushi in Bungo Stray Dogs affected by their Trauma

This subchapter aims to answer Research Question 2, which concerns how the trauma experienced by Nakajima Atsushi affects his mindset and behavior in the anime series Bungo Stray Dogs. After previously analyzing how trauma is represented through Atsushi's childhood experiences, this section focuses on the psychological impact of that trauma as he grows into adolescence. The analysis explores changes in Atsushi's self-perception, his anxiety, how he responds to dangerous situations, and how his trauma shapes his desire to protect others. This discussion is framed using Cathy Caruth's trauma theory.

Atsushi is seen running to save Naomi from a bomb explosion in an office room. The camera captures this scene from an angle that reflects the tension. Atsushi is seen running toward Naomi, his posture leaning forward with one hand outstretched to throw Naomi away from the bomb, while he runs and hugs the bomb to reduce the impact of the damage. This shows his protective side and instinct to save others even at the risk of his own safety.

Atsushi's reflexive actions are a form of trauma that resurfaces in the form of physical actions without planning. Trauma, in Caruth's view, is often not fully experienced at the time of the event, so it will return in the form of repetition compulsion in the future. In Atsushi's case, his childhood experiences of suffering and helplessness made him sensitive to danger and influenced the way he acted in critical situations. Atsushi fears death but continues to engage in dangerous situations. Atsushi remains under the shadow of the orphanage headmaster who told him he was unworthy of life, so he sacrifices himself for others. At least Atsushi feels his life can be useful by saving others' lives. Although Atsushi instinctively feared death, he readily risked his life because, in his mind, other people's lives were more important than his own. Atsushi's past trauma shaped his view of himself. He grew up believing that he was worthless and did not deserve to live.

The scene above shows the moment when Atsushi is on a train with an enemy carrying a bomb. Atsushi is cornered by the enemy's strength and thinks he will die there. His mind is in turmoil, raising many questions. "Will I die here?" This question reveals Atsushi's fundamental fear of death, but he has felt so worthless so often that the possibility of dying feels almost like a fate he deserves. This reflects the loss of self-worth due to childhood trauma, where he was always seen as a burden and unwanted by the orphanage headmaster. "Will they be in danger because of me?" This sentence reveals deep feelings of guilt, which is a characteristic of trauma according to Cathy Caruth, where individuals are not only hurt by past events, but also live with guilt and fear that they will continue to bring disaster to others. Atsushi is not only afraid of dying; he is afraid that his existence endangers others, as he has always felt that his life is a curse on others, as the orphanage headmaster once said.

The camera shows the angle from Atsushi's side, but his face is not visible. Only his right side, which is covered in wounds and blood, can be seen, while the passengers look at him from outside the train door. The passengers place their hopes on Atsushi to fight the enemy and stop the bomb from exploding. Atsushi thinks, "If I could save the passengers and send them home safely, that would mean I deserve to live." This sentence is the core of Atsushi's inner conflict. He does not feel that his life has value, so he must first prove that he deserves to live, and the only way he can think of is to sacrifice himself to save others. This is a coping mechanism for trauma, seeking recognition and meaning through suffering or sacrifice.



Figure 4. Atsushi saved his enemy (ep8 s1 20.11)

In Episode 8 of Bungo Stray Dogs, Atsushi attempts to remove the bomb attached to Kyoka and says, "She can't control her own ability." (19.30') This line demonstrates his empathy, shaped by his own experience of being unable to control his White Tiger power. He sees Kyoka not as a villain, but as a victim of circumstances beyond her control. When Kyoka pushes him away and says, "I don't want to kill anyone anymore.", it confirms her desire to escape violence. Despite this, Atsushi impulsively jumps off the train to save her, successfully disarming the bomb before they both fall into the river.

This incident is consistent with Caruth's concept of repetition compulsion in trauma theory. Atsushi repeats the pattern of sacrificing himself to save innocent people, as he did in the previous episode. This is a trauma-driven action, as he still feels he must atone for his life with his own. Additionally, it reflects the concept of the wound that speaks in trauma theory. Atsushi does not say much, but his actions speak volumes. He chooses to help someone considered an enemy because he understands the emotional wounds behind Kyoka's words.

The implications of Atsushi's childhood trauma have affected his current way of thinking. Atsushi has become impulsive and willing to make extreme sacrifices. He does not think twice about his own life, because in his mind, other people's lives are far more valuable. His trauma has influenced his development gradually. Although his actions initially stemmed from wounds and guilt, from there Atsushi began to grow. He learned to face his fears, make decisions on his own, and eventually grew into a stronger, more purposeful individual.

The scene where Atsushi is affected by the enemy's

magic and almost kills his own comrade. When he comes to his senses, he shouts, "I just wanted to protect anyone!" This reflects Atsushi's desire to be a protector. However, the word "just" indicates that this desire does not stem from a healthy place but rather from a compulsive urge to prove that he can be a protector, as he was once deemed useless and unworthy of living if he couldn't help others. Atsushi also says, "No, I wanted to change!"

"I simply try to protect everyone." Atsushi's words sound like self-defense, spoken in a state of panic and trembling. Atsushi tries to convince himself that his actions are right. The word "simply" indicates an attempt to deny his mistake, which nearly killed his friend, as he had actually intended to protect him but was instead influenced by the enemy's power. Atsushi shouted, "Stop it!" while bending over, holding his head, and covering his ears.

Atsushi's past wounds make him confused about his motives. He is unsure whether he really wants to help others or is just looking for a reason to stay alive. Despite being influenced by the enemy's power, Atsushi refuses to accept the fact that he almost killed his friend. This is a form of the wound that speaks, a wound that cannot be consciously expressed, but appears in screams and a body that refuses to accept reality.

Atsushi appeared hunched over, crying, and his body trembled as he leaned forward, revealing his mental breakdown. He closed his eyes because he couldn't face the reality that he had almost killed his friend. "I can't!" showed that he had failed as a protective friend. He was angry at himself and began to question whether he deserved to live. "I shouldn't have been here!" This is an expression of inferiority and self-rejection. He felt that his presence was dangerous, not helpful. This sentence is a repetition of the verbal abuse he experienced in the orphanage, that he was unwanted, that he did not belong in this world. It is also a form of repetition compulsion in Caruth's trauma, which is the repetition of traumatic situations.

This scene reflects Cathy Caruth's concept of repetition compulsion, as Atsushi once again sacrifices himself to save someone, driven by unresolved guilt and a need to prove his worth. It also illustrates the wound that speaks, where his trauma is expressed through action rather than words.



Figure 5. Atsushi argues with Akutagawa about his reason to stay alive (ep11 s2 12.48)

In *Bungo Stray Dogs*, Akutagawa questions Atsushi's self-sacrificial mindset by saying, "If you spill blood fighting for others, someone out there will stamp you with a seal that says your life has value?!" This criticism highlights Atsushi's belief that his worth depends on saving others, a perception rooted in the rejection and abuse he experienced in the orphanage. Atsushi firmly replies, "What's wrong with that?", showing determination but also revealing that his logic is still shaped by unresolved trauma.

The scene is an example of the concept of repetition compulsion in Caruth's theory, which is how trauma drives a person to repeat past wounds in the form of actions. It also shows that trauma does not only leave passive wounds, but actively shapes the logic of life and mechanisms of self-validation. Atsushi continues to seek external validation through sacrifice. This explains that Atsushi's character development has not fully escaped trauma; rather, it is still controlled by it in the form of extreme devotion to others.

This scene reflects Cathy Caruth's concept of repetition compulsion, as Atsushi repeatedly risks himself to validate his existence. His trauma does not remain a passive wound; it actively influences his life choices and self-worth, demonstrating that his character development is still deeply affected by past suffering.

Still in the same episode, Akutagawa gets mad at Atsushi for being stubborn. "It's because you're a fool who keeps licking his old wounds without realizing you have everything! You have ability, instead of realizing how fortunate you are, you only wallow in self-pity. You're a complete moron!" Akutagawa here serves as a mirror that awakens Atsushi. He points out that Atsushi is trapped in his old wounds, constantly feeling sorry for himself even though objectively he already has everything: strength, opportunities, and people who care. However, trauma prevents Atsushi from recognizing these blessings. This aligns with Caruth's concept of "the wound that speaks," where trauma does not disappear but continues to manifest through the victim's attitudes and thoughts. Atsushi refuses to acknowledge his abilities because trauma has obscured his identity and self-worth.

Atsushi's tears reflect an emotional turmoil he cannot fully comprehend. In response, Dazai remarks, "Only you can understand them. When someone's father dies, they tend to cry," highlighting that even unexplainable emotions are valid and often rooted in deep psychological wounds. This sentence implies that the orphanage headmaster did indeed treat Atsushi cruelly, but behind all that, he remained the only figure who had shaped Atsushi's life since childhood. Since there were no other parental figures in his life, the orphanage headmaster automatically became the father figure, albeit in a painful form.

Atsushi's tears signaled that he was experiencing mixed emotions of hatred and loss. The climax is where Atsushi realizes that what the orphanage headmaster has been doing all this time is just to prevent him from hating himself, and it works because throughout the episode, no matter how angry Atsushi gets at himself, he still doesn't

want to die and continues to find reasons to live, even if it means going through other people.

Trauma is not fully grasped at the time it occurs, but returns in haunting ways often through speech, behavior, or even silence. In this context, Atsushi is finally able to voice himself as a victim. He admits that he suffered and cannot forgive. These statements are not merely words, but expressions of a long-suppressed psychological wound. This is the essence of the wound that speaks, trauma speaking through restrained emotions that eventually surface in moments of reflection and confession.

The analysis above discusses Atsushi's behavior when trauma still dominates him. Before Atsushi realized the reason why the orphanage caretaker was violent towards him, Atsushi was always filled with excessive guilt, unable to make quick decisions when needed, afraid of becoming a monster like the label given by the orphanage director, and always refusing to accept the fact that he was still haunted by his past. All of these are the effects of unprocessed and unaccepted trauma. He lived in a cycle of repetition compulsion and belatedness that he was not yet aware of.

However, Atsushi's journey did not stop at that point. Over time and through the experiences he faced, especially through interactions with the people around him, he began to experience changes in how he interpreted his past wounds. In the next analysis, we will discuss how Atsushi's thought patterns and behavior underwent significant changes after he began to acknowledge and accept his trauma.

Atsushi's acceptance of his childhood trauma begins to be revealed in episode 11 of the third season. Akutagawa asking Atsushi about his reasons for saving others. "You're a coward, so why do you risk your life for others?" Akutagawa's question shows his lack of understanding of Atsushi's way of thinking. For Akutagawa, a coward who fears death should prioritize his own safety. Atsushi responds, "Because I think I have to help them. It's the right thing to do." Atsushi's answer reflects his growth. He no longer acts impulsively out of a sense of worthlessness, but because he believes that helping others is the right thing to do. Atsushi's expression is calm and confident, reinforcing that it is a conscious response. It signifies a shift from trauma to stable moral values. He still remembers the words of the orphanage headmaster, but his response is now more composed.



Figure 6. Atsushi accepts that the orphanage headmaster is always on his mind. Timecode (ep12 s3 10:42)

Akutagawa confronts Atsushi's true motivation by saying, "You want to escape the memories of your childhood and gain the right to live. But I've heard that the man who raised you died." This accusation suggests that Atsushi saves others to escape his traumatic past and justify his existence. Atsushi does not immediately deny it and responds, "He's not dead. He lives in my mind now, always saying the cursed, 'Do the right thing.' He's dead so I can't even get revenge on him." Through this statement, Atsushi reveals that although the orphanage headmaster has died, the trauma remains alive in his mind as an internal voice. His words, "I can't even get revenge", express unresolved pain and resignation, as he cannot confront or retaliate against the source of his suffering.

However, this moment also marks a shift in his development. Instead of seeking revenge, Atsushi begins to transform his trauma into moral guidance. His serious and determined gaze shows maturity and mental strength; the wound still exists, but it no longer fully controls him. In line with Cathy Caruth's concept of *the wound that speaks*, his trauma continues to echo within him, yet it now guides him toward doing what is right. Overall, Atsushi's childhood trauma significantly shapes his character development, influencing his actions, dialogue, and responses throughout the story.

Initial Condition Due to Trauma	Development
Having a negative self-image and feeling worthless	Experiencing social acceptance at the Armed Detective Agency, leading to increased self-confidence and self-acceptance.
Acting out of fear and survival instincts	Recognising his role and responsibilities towards others
Depending on external validation to feel accepted	Begin to have confidence in his own values and abilities
High emotional sensitivity	Using traumatic experiences as a basis for understanding others, thereby strengthening his character.
Haunted by traumatic memories and recurring guilt	Daring to face and accept his past and grow to become a stronger person

A comparison between Atsushi's behavior before and after experiencing trauma shows a significant shift in his character development. Before experiencing trauma,

Atsushi exhibited strong symptoms of trauma such as excessive guilt, fear of rejection, and self-doubt. The trauma from his past in the orphanage manifests in the form of repetition compulsion and belatedness, as explained by Cathy Caruth, where the trauma does not surface at the time of the event, but rather when he is confronted with similar situations that trigger the same emotional reactions repeatedly. This is evident when Atsushi continues to blame himself, even in situations where he is not at fault.

However, after going through a series of events and emotional reflections, especially in the episode where he accepts the truth about the orphanage director and confronts an enemy who mirrors himself, a fundamental change occurs. Atsushi begins to understand that his trauma cannot be erased, but it can be faced and integrated as part of himself. At this point, Caruth's concept of the wound that speaks becomes tangible, the wounds of the past no longer serve as destructive whispers but as a guiding voice leading him toward growth. He becomes more confident, bold in making decisions, and no longer avoids power or responsibility. This process marks the transformation from a trauma survivor into a fully healed and developed individual.

The analysis of Atsushi's representation of trauma in *Bungo Stray Dogs* contributes to the understanding that psychological wounds are not only presented as narrative background, but are central to character development. The implications of first findings suggest that trauma can be expressed through complex narrative and visual elements, such as sound symbols, flashbacks, and dark colors, which effectively convey the character's emotional suffering to the audience. This reinforces Caruth's view that trauma is unspeakable, yet it still speaks through indirect forms of representation.

Meanwhile, the second findings show that trauma has a real impact on the character's mindset and behavior, and these changes can be observed progressively. This reflects the psychological dynamics of trauma survivors, where the healing process requires emotional confrontation and self-acceptance. The practical implications of these two findings are that *Bungo Stray Dogs* serves not only as entertainment but also as a medium that can raise awareness about trauma and healing. Atsushi's representation can serve as a mirror for viewers who have experienced similar traumas, showing that trauma is not the end of the journey but rather a part of the process of forming a complete identity.

CONCLUSION

The anime *Bungo Stray Dogs* effectively portrays complex psychological trauma through both narrative and visual elements in the character of Nakajima Atsushi. In addressing the first research question, the findings indicate that Atsushi's trauma is represented through flashbacks, repeated visual patterns, internal monologues, as well as symbolic use of color and sound. These techniques align with Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, particularly the concepts of belatedness,

repetition compulsion, and the wound that speaks. His trauma does not fully emerge at the moment of violence but reappears later through emotional responses when he faces situations that trigger memories of his past.

Concerning the second finding, the analysis demonstrates that trauma significantly shapes Atsushi's mindset and behavior. Prior to accepting his past, he is characterized by guilt, self-doubt, and insecurity. As the narrative develops, however, he gradually recognizes and embraces his trauma as part of his identity, leading to meaningful personal growth. He becomes more composed, rational, and capable of controlling his abilities responsibly. Therefore, the anime not only depicts the pain caused by trauma but also emphasizes the possibility of resilience, transformation, and healing.

SUGGESTIONS

This study focuses on the representation of trauma in anime through one main character, leaving room for further exploration. Future research could consider comparing other characters in *Bungo Stray Dogs* who also experience trauma, such as Dazai Osamu, Izumi Kyoka, or Edogawa Ranpo, to see more complex variations in responses to trauma. Additionally, a cross-media approach, such as comparing trauma representation in manga, light novels, and anime, could offer new insights into how visual media and text handle trauma issues differently. Finally, this study could serve as a reference for literary studies related to character psychology in contemporary fiction.

REFERENCES

- Abubakar, S. (2017). Art as Narrative: through Literature Recounting Trauma. *IRA-International Journal of Management & Social Sciences*, 08(01), 118–123. <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.21013/jmss.v8.n1.p13>
- Aryuni, M. (2023). POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER PADA PENYINTAS. *Kinesik*, 10(1), 113–131. <https://doi.org/DOIhttps://doi.org/10.22487/ejk.v10i1.753>
- Barodawala, S., & Mulley, G. P. (1997). Visual hallucinations. *JRCP*, 31(1), 42–48. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0035-8819\(25\)00268-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0035-8819(25)00268-5)
- Cai, Z. (2024). The Emotional Impact of Animation on Its Audience. *Communications in Humanities Research*, 52(1), 18–26. <https://doi.org/10.54254/2753-7064/2024.17873>
- Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. The Johns Hopkins

- University Press.
<https://joacamillopenna.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/caruth-unclaimed-experience.pdf>
- Cho, H., Disher, T., Lee, W., Keating, S. A., & Lee, J. H. (2018). Facet Analysis of Anime Genres : The Challenges of Defining Genre Information for Popular Cultural Objects. 45(6), 484–499.
<https://doi.org/10.5771/0943-7444-2018-6-484.Abstract>
- Devianti, A. L., Rahmat, A., & Purnomo, P. (2025). Visualisasi Trauma Psikologis melalui Representasi Yōkai dalam Anime Mononoke (2007). 9(2), 534–547.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.14710/kiryoku.v9i2.534-547.1>.
- Fadilah, Y. (2024). Impact of Trauma on the Subject in Sebuah Cerita Sedih, Gempa Waktu, dan Omong Kosong yang Harus Ada: Caruthian Trauma Approach. Kandai: Journal of Language Studies, 20(2), 189–207.
<https://doi.org/10.26499/jk.v20i2.6672>
- Hardianti, S. (2022). MEMORI TRAUMA PERANG AMBON DALAM NOVEL KEI : KUTEMUKAN CINTA DI TENGAH PERANG KARYA ERNI ALADJAI Oleh Sitti Hardianti A . PENDAHULUAN Novel Kei : Kutemukan Cinta di Tengah Perang yang ditulis oleh Erni Aladjai dan terbit pada tahun 2013 adalah sebuah karya. Adabiyat: Jurnal Bahasa Dan Sastra, VI(2), 259–277.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.14421/ajbs.2022.06206>
- Kurnia, I. A. (2018). Penggambaran Trauma Arima Kousei Dalam Anime Your Lie In April Menggunakan Metode Analitik. JANARU SAJA-Jurnal Program Studi Sastra Jepang, 7(1), 8–19.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.34010/js.v7i1.2421>
- Muldoon, O. T., Haslam, S. A., Haslam, C., Cruwys, T., Kearns, M., Jetten, J., Muldoon, O. T., Haslam, S. A., Haslam, C., & Cruwys, T. (2020). European Review of Social Psychology The social psychology of responses to trauma : social identity pathways associated with divergent traumatic responses. European Review of Social Psychology, 30(1), 311–348.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10463283.2020.1711628>
- Permata, H. N., & Arianingsih, A. (2022). Tindak tutur ilokusi tidak langsung dalam anime bungou stray dogs. Mahadaya Journal of Language, Arts, and Culture, 2(1), 37–50.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.34010/mhd.v2i1.7039>
- Rizqina, K., Jehan, D., & Fabtian, S. (2023). Studying Typography Used in Ability " Rashomon : Tenma Tengai " in The Bungou Stray Dogs Anime Adaptation. Interdisciplinary Journal of Asia Pacific Arts, 6(2), 162–169.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.31091/lekesan.v6i2.2441>
- Roche, A. I., Kroska, E. B., Miller, M. L., Kroska, S. K., & Hara, M. W. O. (2018). Childhood trauma and problem behavior : Examining the mediating roles of experiential avoidance and mindfulness processes Childhood trauma and problem behavior : Examining the mediating roles of experiential avoidance and mindfulness processes. Journal of American College Health ISSN:, 67(1), 17–26.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2018.1455689>
- Sari, H. K., & Heriyati, N. (2021). TRANSMISSION OF TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE THROUGH FLASHBACK IN THE FILM “ SPEAK .” Mahadaya Journal of Language, Arts, and Culture, 1(1), 129–140.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.34010/mhd.v1i1.4851>
- Starcevic, A. (2019). Introductory Chapter : Psychological Trauma (A. Starcevic (ed.)). IntechOpen.
<https://doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.77651>
- Tanjung, P. N., & Manesah, D. (2025). Analisis Color Grading dalam Menampilkan Adegan Flashback pada Film “ Bebas .” Imajinasi : Jurnal Ilmu Pengetahuan, Seni, Dan Teknologi, 2(1), 21–29.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.62383/imajinasi.v2i1.537>
- Wahab, G. A., & Mahmuddin, H. (2023). LITERATUR REVIEW : PENGARUH KEKERASAN KOMUNIKASI VERBAL (VERBAL ABUSE) TERHADAP PEMBENTUKAN KARAKTER ANAK USIA 3-6 TAHUN. JIMPK : Jurnal Ilmiah Mahasiswa & Penelitian Keperawatan, 3(3), 45–53.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.35892/jimpk.v3i3.682>
- Wang, M., Liu, J., Sun, Q., & Zhu, W. (2019). Mechanisms of the formation and involuntary repetition of trauma-related flashback: A review of major theories of ptsd. International Journal of Mental Health Promotion, 21(3), 81–97.
<https://doi.org/10.32604/IJMHP.2019.011010>
- Wickham, S., Bentall, R., & Psychol, M. C. (2016). Are Specific Early-Life Adversities Associated With Specific Symptoms of Psychosis? A Patient Study Considering Just World Beliefs as a Mediator. The Journal Of Nervous And Mental Disease, 204(8), 606–613.

<https://doi.org/10.1097/NMD.000000000000005>

[11](#)