

## Onodera Punpun's Changing Forms: A Reflection of Emotional and Psychological Growth in *Oyasumi Punpun*

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### ABSTRACT

*Oyasumi Punpun* by Inio Asano is a slice-of-life manga that explores psychological depth through its protagonist, Onodera Punpun. This study examines the symbolic meanings behind Punpun's eight changing forms and how they reflect his emotional and psychological states. The visual contrast between Punpun and other realistically drawn characters sparked interest in exploring these forms. Using Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory, Punpun's growth is categorized into school age, adolescence, and young adulthood. Semiotic analysis is also applied to interpret the connotations, denotations, and myths behind each form. The findings show his transformations mirror inner struggles, childhood reflects innocence and dependency, adolescence shows identity confusion through three distinct forms and young adulthood presents emotional turmoil and eventual acceptance. These symbolic shifts reveal how manga effectively portrays mental health and emotional development.

**Keywords:** manga, mental health, psychological state, psychosocial development, semiotics

### INTRODUCTION

Manga, or Japanese comics, features diverse genres and demographics. Such as *Josei* for women, *Shoujo* for teenage girls, *Shonen* for young boys, and *Seinen* for men. Though these demographics can be enjoyed by all people, regardless of their gender and age. *Seinen* targets adult men through mature themes like politics, trauma, and identity (Thompson, 2007, p. 327). A prominent genre within seinen is slice of life, which offers emotionally resonant depictions of ordinary experiences, often blending realism and melodrama. One of which is *Oyasumi Punpun*. This manga is written by Inio Asano, published in 2007 and ended in 2013. This manga is a hit among youngsters and received a Jury Recommendation in the 13th Japan Media Art Festival (Silverman, 2018).

*Oyasumi Punpun* takes on the slice of life genre. That represents a large section of manga in the market, usually focused on mundane life, especially young people's lives such as school, and interpersonal relationships (Brenner, 2007, p. 112). Stories in this genre are not strictly close with realism but decorated with more melodramatic or exaggerated humor. Along with conflicts such as traumatic events that littered the story, it is timed perfectly to capture that sense of mundane life (Brenner, 2007, p. 113). Slice of life takes a closer look at ordinary lives that are often missed by people and turns them into a moral lesson or something to relate with the audience, since slice of life also relies on relatability because it was based on people's experiences.

This paper explores the symbolic meanings behind Punpun's changing forms in *Oyasumi Punpun* and how they reflect his emotional and psychological development across different life stages. The story follows Onodera Punpun, an ordinary boy depicted in a bird-like caricature form, contrasting with the human characters around him. As he navigates family conflict, personal trauma, and identity struggles, his form transforms eight times. Each

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representing a different psychological state, from childhood innocence to emotional isolation and eventual self-acceptance. We chose this topic due to the striking visual contrast and rich symbolism in Punpun's evolving forms, aiming to analyze how each one mirrors his inner development. This study focuses specifically on selected chapters (chapter 1, 2, 10, 12, 18, 55, 64, 77, 84, 99, 102, 103, 113, 114, 143, and 144) of *Oyasumi Punpun* that highlight the protagonist's changing forms and key events that illustrate the relationship between these transformations and his emotional and psychological states

In examining *Oyasumi Punpun*, we will use two theories. Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development (1977) and Semiotics by Ferdinand de Saussure (Danesi, 2004, p. 8). In the first theory, each stage of life is associated with psychological struggles, each of which contributes to a major aspect of personality (Gross, 2020, p. 179). Human development progresses through eight stages, starting with learning trust, gaining autonomy, overcoming doubts, developing a sense of industry, navigating identity struggles, balancing intimacy and isolation, seeking growth or facing stagnation, and finally confronting integrity or despair in old age. In this case, we only use three out of eight stages of development. Which are the school age (Industry vs. Inferiority), early adolescents (Identity vs. Role Confusion), and young adulthood (Intimacy vs. Isolation) to track Punpun's psychological and emotional progress. These stages align with key events in his life, allowing for a deeper understanding on how Punpun's shifting forms symbolize his internal conflicts and evolving mental state. A secondary theory that we use is semiotics. To interpret the meanings behind Punpun's forms, this study applies Barthes' semiotic theory. According to Chandler (2017), Barthes explains that signification works in two levels: denotation, the literal meaning, and connotation, the cultural or emotional association, which together form myths as a higher order of meaning. These myths serve to naturalize cultural values and ideologies, making them appear normal or self-evident (Chandler, 2017, pp. 166, 172).

## ANALYSIS

In this part, we will analyze the meanings behind each of Punpun's forms and their relation with his emotional and psychological state. We divide the analysis into three sections, following the timeline of Punpun's life from school age, adolescence, and young adulthood. We use the theory of semiotics to interpret the symbolism of each form and Erikson's Psychosocial Development theory (1977) to explore Punpun's inner struggles. The analysis begins with his childhood form, followed by his three adolescent forms, and ends with the four forms he takes in young adulthood.

### **The Symbolic Meanings Behind Punpun's Forms and Their Connection to His Psychological and Emotional States**

In *Oyasumi Punpun*, the protagonist, Punpun, undergoes eight distinct physical transformations, each carrying symbolic significance. These forms include a simplistic bird-like caricature, the same form with slight modifications, a tetrahedron, a bird-headed humanoid, a four-eyed black cylindrical humanoid, a cylindrical-headed humanoid, a horned black cylindrical humanoid, and finally, a human head. By applying Semiotics, the meanings behind these forms can be interpreted through denotation and connotation. These changes also correspond with Punpun's emotional and psychological development, which can be categorized into three stages based on Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory: school age, adolescence, and young adulthood.

#### **Punpun's Forms and Their Psychological Meaning during School Age**

In the school age stage (ages 6–11), children typically begin to develop a sense of industry through social interaction and achievement. However, without proper support, they may develop a sense of inferiority (quoted by Cherry, 2005b). During this stage, denotatively,

Punpun appears as a simplistic bird-like caricature, visually represented with an elongated, oval-shaped head, two black dots for eyes, a small beak, stick-like limbs, and three-pronged feet like in the figure below.



Figure 2.1 Punpun's first form.

Source: Asano, I. (2007), *Oyasumi Punpun*, chapter 1.

Unlike other characters, Punpun's body lacks human features, appearing instead as a simplified "bird-like" figure with a beak and three-pronged feet, resembling traits of the bird class Aves (Gill et al., 2025). Birds are often symbolic of freedom and imagination, but they also represent family and care due to their strong social bonds (Brophey, 2024). Baby birds can signify innocence and youth, while parent birds reflect guardianship. In this context, young Punpun symbolizes a baby bird, innocent and dependent, still seeking guidance as he navigates early social experiences.

Punpun's bird-like form reflects his innocence and dependency, aligning with Erikson's school age stage where he first develops industry through social interaction. However, his growing sense of inferiority and self-doubt, shaped by exposure to parental conflict, prevents him from fully acting on his goals. His hesitation during a school presentation and later doubt about traveling to Kagoshima show how fear of judgment, especially from Aiko, affects his confidence (Gross, 2020, p. 181). Though he initially dreams big, he lies to avoid ridicule. His desperation to fulfill a promise to Aiko leads him to explore an abandoned factory, hoping to find money. This moment reflects how emotional pressure and psychological struggles are externalized through both his actions and shifting forms.

### **The Symbolic and Psychological Significance of Punpun's Forms in Adolescence**

In adolescence (ages 12–18), individuals transition from childhood to adulthood, exploring independence and identity (quoted by Cherry, 2005b). During this stage, Punpun experiences identity and role confusion, reflected in his shifting forms. As he navigates this period, he adopts three main forms: a modified bird-like figure, a tetrahedron, and a bird-headed humanoid. These changes mirror his struggle with self-perception and social interaction.

#### **Modified bird-like figure**

In this stage, Punpun has developed a slight modification in his form. Denotatively, his form retains his original bird-like appearance but with subtle changes. His 'body' becomes slimmer, more elongated and less round compared to his childhood form. Furthermore, the emergence of three distinct strands of hair atop his head is a clear added part that appears in this time as shown in the figure below.

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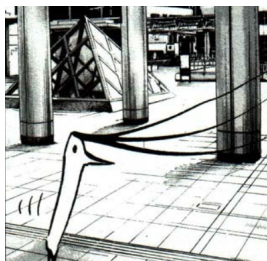


Figure 2.2 Punpun's second form.

Source: Asano, I. (2007), *Oyasumi Punpun*, chapter 55.

Connotatively, these changes reflect Punpun's shifting emotions and early attempts at self-expression during adolescence. No longer a child, he begins adapting to new social norms, mimicking behaviors to fit in despite feeling out of place. His altered appearance mirrors his effort to conform and be seen as "normal" among his peers. He also was not used to these changes at all and did not know who he was anymore based on the dialogue of the *manga*.

Adolescence is often seen as a time of instability and identity exploration. According to World Health Organization (2021), stressors like peer pressure and identity development are common during this stage, aligning with Erikson's theory that failure to form a stable identity can lead to confusion (as cited in Cherry, 2005b). Punpun begins this phase with subtle physical changes and growing emotional complexity. His psychological state becomes marked by frustration, especially after a failed romantic encounter with his classmate Kanie, where his desperation leads to inappropriate behavior and rejection, intensifying his negative self-image and emotional turmoil.

### **Tetrahedron**

In this phase, Punpun's form has transformed into a simpler shape, stripping away his previous bird-like form. Denotatively, this form takes a rigid geometric shape, a tetrahedron which has four triangular faces including a triangular base (Gilbert & Ault, 2023) like in the figure below.



Figure 2.3 Punpun's third form.

Source: Asano, I. (2007), *Oyasumi Punpun*, chapter 77.

The tetrahedron, known as the most stable structure in sacred geometry, symbolizes transformation and the element of fire (Gold, 2025). In Tantric Buddhism, it represents emptiness, with three closed sides symbolizing wishless, signless, and ultimate emptiness, and one open side facing upward (Watt, 2015). Connotatively, Punpun's transformation into a tetrahedron reflects his emotional detachment and identity loss. This shift occurs during a period of isolation, symbolizing emptiness (Watt, 2015), as he withdraws and interacts only with a lonely old man who urges him to open up. The causes of Punpun's detachment are linked to past traumas involving key female figures: Midori, who sexually assaulted him, Kanie, a classmate he inappropriately touched out of frustration, his abusive and emotionally unstable mother, and Aiko, his love interest, whom he abandoned due to self-doubt and family issues.

This form of Punpun symbolizes self-isolation as a defense mechanism and growing emotional detachment. Trapped in the tetrahedron, he disconnects from others to protect himself from overwhelming emotions and past trauma, a response that can risk leading to PTSD (Downey & Crummy, 2022, p. 3). His isolation reflects Erikson's identity vs. role confusion stage, where unresolved trauma contributes to a fragile sense of self. Eventually, Sachi confronts him, pushing Punpun to face his fears and begin opening up, marking his emotional growth and emergence from the tetrahedron.

### **Bird-headed humanoid**

The next form that he takes on represents an evolved form from both his childhood and his adolescence, signifying the shift in his identity. He is no longer trapped inside the tetrahedron and is now donning a more humanoid form. Denotatively, Punpun's head reverts back to the bird-like caricature used during earlier stages of his life, maintaining the familiar simplicity. Yet it sits on a fully human, adult male body, complete with clothing and posture as shown below.



Figure 2.4 Punpun's fourth form.

Source: Asano, I. (2007), *Oyasumi Punpun*, chapter 99.

This form connotatively represents Punpun's identity struggles as he exists between childhood and adulthood, unable to fully embrace either. Inspired by his neighbor Fujikawa Takashi, Punpun adopts his identity, reflecting a desire to escape and fit societal expectations of adulthood. Despite appearing older, Punpun's childlike head signifies his lingering attachment to his past, while his attempt to become someone else highlights his internal conflict and inability to form a stable sense of self (Schneider et al., 2016, p. 7). At this stage, Punpun's psychological state reaches a breaking point, shown through his desperate act of identity theft. Struggling with role confusion, he seeks comfort by adopting a socially idealized identity. Emotionally, his envy and dissatisfaction drive him to become Takashi, hoping to gain the life and relationships he longs for.

### **Punpun's physical forms and emotional development in Young Adulthood**

As Punpun enters adulthood with a fragmented identity, he faces Erikson's stage of intimacy vs. isolation. This phase involves seeking meaningful relationships while navigating vulnerability and fear. A poor sense of self can lead to emotional isolation and unstable relationships (quoted by Cherry, 2005b). During this period, Punpun's forms become darker, reflecting his inner turmoil, as he reunites with his childhood crush and begins a path toward healing. He takes on four forms: a four-eyed black cylinder humanoid, a cylindrical-headed humanoid, a horned version, and finally, a human head.

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### Four-eyed black cylinder humanoid

Denotatively, this new head changes quite a bit from the last one. His head transforms into a solid black cylinder with two pairs of open eyes, sorted in a vertical line as seen below.

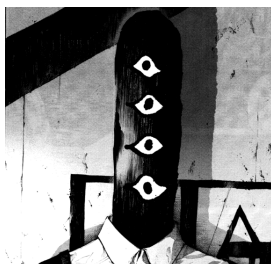


Figure 2.5 Punpun fifth form.

Source: Asano, I. (2007), *Oyasumi Punpun*, chapter 102.

Connotatively, the color black is often linked to death and intense emotions such as anger, fear, and sadness (Cherry, 2005a). Punpun's four-eyed form reflects this turmoil. Symbolizing heightened awareness and emotional overload. According to Fingesten (1959), multiple eyes in art suggest advanced self-awareness or individuation. In Punpun's case, this form emerges after he reunites with Aiko and begins to question his actions, including stealing someone else's identity and seducing a girl under false pretenses. The sudden change in his appearance marks a psychological crisis and detachment from both humanity and himself. This visual transformation represents the chaos of adulthood, echoing how transitions into this life stage often bring emotional and existential confusion (New York City Psychotherapy Collective, 2023).

### Cylindrical-headed humanoid

In this stage, Punpun retains the humanoid body from the previous form, indicating a continued connection to adult identity and physical maturity. However, the main difference lies in his head, which becomes further simplified. Denotatively, it now takes the shape of a plain black cylinder, completely devoid of facial features or distinguishing marks, while his body remains the same aside from occasional outfit changes.



Figure 2.6 Punpun pinning down Aiko.

Source: Asano, I. (2007), *Oyasumi Punpun*, chapter 103.

This form reflects how adulthood brings uncertainty, repressed desire, and emotional instability. Punpun's dark, faceless appearance symbolizes how shame, guilt, and societal pressure conceal rather than strengthen identity. His inability to manage desire and boundaries stems from unresolved trauma, affecting how he approaches intimacy (Center for Intimacy Connection and Change, 2024). The reunion with Aiko triggers emotional numbness, while his simplified form represents suppressed identity and inner conflict, ultimately leading to greater emotional distance.

### Horned black cylinder humanoid

During this turbulent period, Punpun maintains his humanoid body and black cylindrical head, but with a notable change: his head now features a prominent pair of horns. Denotatively, it remains a long black cylinder, with the addition of horns as seen below.



Figure 2.7 Punpun seventh form.

Source: Asano, I. (2007), *Oyasumi Punpun*, chapter 113.

Connotatively, horns carry deep symbolic meaning. Often linked to strength and wisdom due to their natural presence in animals, yet also associated with death and moral corruption, especially through their depiction in devil imagery (Flores, 2025). This duality reflects Punpun's internal conflict during this stage. After discovering Aiko's abuse at the hands of her mother, Punpun's protective instincts intensify, deepening their emotional bond. When Aiko's mother violently lashes out with a knife, nearly harming both of them, Punpun is forced into a moral dilemma. In an act of desperation and perceived necessity, he kills her to protect Aiko and himself, marking a turning point in his emotional and moral descent.

### A human head

In the final form, Punpun's form eventually evolved into something starkly different from any of his previous forms. Denotatively, this form presents Punpun as a human figure, with a single eye peeking from beneath the wrapped bandages around his head as seen in the figure below.



Figure 2.8 Punpun's final form.

Source: Asano, I. (2007), *Oyasumi Punpun*, chapter 144.

Lying in the hospital bed, Punpun's face is mostly bandaged, showing only one eye and his mouth. This is the first time his head appears human, marking a stark contrast to his previous symbolic forms and signaling a major shift in his emotional state. Punpun's final, human-like form symbolizes his confrontation with reality and the start of self-acceptance. The bandages represent both lingering trauma and the process of healing. After a failed suicide attempt, he is found by Sachi, who once helped him before, marking a turning point where he begins to face his past. This transformation reflects the idea that adulthood involves accepting and healing from one's experiences. In his final state, Punpun reaches a fragile yet sincere sense of peace

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through self-acceptance. After a long journey marked by trauma, isolation, and identity confusion, his emotional breakthrough comes from opening up to Sachi and the authorities, signaling growth. Though still vulnerable after Aiko's death, it is his emotional connection with Sachi that helps him confront despair and begin to truly relate and heal.

## CONCLUSION

This study explores the symbolic meanings behind Onodera Punpun's changing forms in *Oyasumi Punpun* and their connection to his emotional and psychological development using Erikson's psychosocial theory and semiotics. Focusing on three stages: school age, adolescence, and young adulthood, it shows how Punpun's eight transformations reflect key emotional states and inner struggles. His bird-like childhood form symbolizes innocence and dependency, but also growing inferiority from trauma. In adolescence, his forms reflect identity confusion and emotional isolation, including a tetrahedron symbolizing numbness and a bird-headed humanoid showing his attempt to escape himself. In adulthood, his dark, abstract forms represent shame, trauma, and moral collapse, culminating in violence. His final human form, bandaged and vulnerable, marks a step toward healing and self-acceptance. Ultimately, *Oyasumi Punpun* uses visual symbolism to highlight issues of mental health, identity, and emotional trauma.

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