

Your Favorite Shonen Isn't A Seinen

Chainsaw Man is a shonen. Hunter x Hunter is a shonen. Attack on Titan is a shonen. All of your favorite shonen are not seinen. This is not my opinion, this is merely a fact that you can choose to accept or deny. This is not something that can be argued. There are so many misconceptions about shonen manga and their inability to be seinen, it is a little startling. I assume that most manga fans understand the basic definition of shonen—manga targeted at teenage boys—but I don't think a majority understand that its definition isn't malleable. You might wonder, at what point does a manga become too dark or violent for shonen and who decides that? Well, the publishers do and certainly not the English speaking manga fans who write angry comments on YouTube videos or get into Twitter arguments. If a manga is in a shonen magazine, then the publisher has decided to market it towards a teenage audience—and that is the singular fact that makes a manga a shonen. It is not the content of a manga, its level of maturity, or even the age or gender of the actual audience that matters. Those factors may influence whether a publisher chooses to place a manga in a shonen or seinen magazine, but they are not defining traits themselves. Otherwise, it's all about the marketing and what group is being targeted by the publishers and their magazines. That is all that determines what demographic a manga is classified as.

Then, if it's that simple to determine whether a manga is shonen or seinen, why is it so common that people get it mixed up? Why are there so many fans that want to claim their shonen is seinen or, in more direct terms, too mature for a teenage audience? Well, the answer is simple: People want to believe what they like is above what a teenage boy would like, as if media presented for a younger audience can't be this good. Although, that mentality implies compelling writing has to be limited to adult media, which couldn't be further from the truth. *Avatar: The Last Airbender* has more to say than some seinen and yet it's a children's cartoon that anyone could enjoy. That doesn't suddenly make it a more adult show. It's approachable to children while retaining an appeal for an older audience. There are numerous shonen that fit a similar bill—JoJo's Bizarre Adventure, Attack on Titan, or even A Silent Voice—all of those are manga intended for teenagers to read but are worth seeing even as an adult. That doesn't mean any of those are targeted specifically at adults or a "more mature audience." It just means they have a broad appeal. I struggle to understand why people are so desperate to elevate something that they like to be above what it is. You like a shonen manga that will widely appeal to teenagers, so what? Is that a bad thing?

I am about to sound incredibly nitpicky, but stay with me. When someone says that "Chainsaw Man is pretty much a seinen, it's just classified as shonen," my eye twitches a little from

how misleading this language is, especially if it's in a YouTube video seen by hundreds of thousands of people. What does it mean for a manga to be seinen but classified as a shonen? If we take the literal definitions and insert them into what he's saying, we end up with "Chainsaw Man is pretty much a manga targeted for adult men, it's just marketed for teenage boys." It doesn't make any sense, of course, and that's obviously not what he's trying to say. He's just trying to say it's darker than most shonen and is more comparable to manga in seinen magazines (which I don't think is entirely true either but whatever). As is the case with shonen, seinen is only a demographic—a suggestion from publishers for what group of people would be most interested. As I've established, the "classification," or rather the marketing of a manga, is the only determining factor in whether a manga is a seinen or not. If a manga is being marketed for teenagers then what possibly can make it a seinen? My problem comes from how people will hear what The Masked Man is saying and then believe that the definitions of shonen and seinen are flexible or, worse yet, interchangeable. This whole train of thought indirectly implies that there's a determining factor in whether a manga is shonen or seinen beyond the classification, or serialization, which is just not true.

A lot of manga fans seem to conflate violence and darker storytelling with seinen and, while there's overlap between the two, neither is inherently connected. A manga that is violent, mature, or dark is not shonen nor seinen as a result of those qualities, that is independently decided by its serialization. Those qualities do not determine what demographic the manga is, they merely reflect what publishers feel comfortable putting into their magazines. Attack on Titan isn't too mature to be a shonen because shonen can be as mature as what is published in a shonen magazine. Manga fans often have it backwards. The demographic does not determine the exact qualities a manga can have, rather the qualities of a manga determine what kinds of qualities the demographic has. ~~If a manga is shonen and it has these qualities, then that means shonen can have these qualities. Ultra-violence? Well, Devilman had that back in the 70s, so that can be shonen. Lite nudity? Well, ecchi tends to be shonen, so that can be shonen. Dark storytelling? Fullmetal Alchemist has some pretty twisted stuff, so that can be shonen. You get the picture.~~

Quick footnote: It isn't only graphic content that a publisher will use to decide an appropriate audience either. When it comes to the differences between shonen and seinen, most English-speaking manga fans are not going to consider reading difficulty. For publishers, it's a massive factor in determining what audience is best suited for a manga and what magazine they will place it within. Shonen uses furigana and less complex kanji while seinen uses more complicated kanji and rarely furigana. Because most of us are reading translated versions of manga, rather than the original language, it's easy to overlook that as a leading reason a manga would be placed in a

particular magazine. The level of language comprehension required to read Naruto, or any Shonen Jump manga, is going to be lower than what is required of Monster, that is true in both languages but especially in Japanese.

Okay, so I think I've covered all the bases in terms of technicalities. A manga is a shonen because it's in a shonen magazine, you either get that or you don't understand marketing. What about in a different sense, though? Some people understand that a manga like Hunter x Hunter is a shonen but don't believe it should be a shonen—instead it should have been in a seinen magazine. For as long as anyone reads shonen manga, there will be titles that people want to exclude but, once you exclude all the violent or darker manga from the demographic, then of course it's going to look like shonen can't have those qualities. It's like saying blue can't be a bright color, but you exclude all the bright shades of blue—of course you're going to think blue can't be a bright color because you excluded the shades that would apply. Likewise, shonen will seem as if it can't be mature or dark when you exclude every mature or dark manga from the demographic. Titles like these are not seinen, manga to be excluded from shonen, nor should they have been seinen. They are the precipitous of what shonen can be.

One of the series that I've seen countless people try to argue as being seinen is Chainsaw Man (mostly everything I'm about to say can apply to other shonen too) and it always feels like a desperate attempt to say "I like this because it's more mature than every other shonen." Is that really true, though? Yeah, it has a great action packed story with a lot to say, but I don't think anything about it can suddenly separate it from being a shonen—and clearly Shueisha also felt that way. What about it is so extreme that it can't be read by a teenager? The handful of fanservice pages? Are you kidding me, have you seen what's been in Shonen Jump? The violence? Sure, it's extreme but it's A) pretty lite on guro B) comparable to other ultraviolent shonen and C) still does not come close to the most graphic scenes of seinen's most intense manga. Sure, it's a little more intense than some of the other mainstream shonen but so were JoJo's Bizarre Adventure, Devilman, Attack on Titan or even parts of Fullmetal Alchemist—all series that are popular with teenagers. Chainsaw Man is not so special as to be excluded from shonen just because it has some grit, because plenty of other shonen have grit. So, what are we left with that could make it "more seinen?" The story? It has a relatively complex story that goes into some dark places but that's not at all unique to seinen manga. What about all the other shonen that have rich and thematic stories (Death Note, JoJo Part 5, Silver Spoon, Fullmetal Alchemist, Mob Psycho 100, Devilman, Attack on Titan, Hell's Paradise, Welcome to the N.H.K., Hunter x Hunter, etc.)? Even then, I wouldn't say anything about its

story is too much for a teenager to handle. The dialogue is easily digestible, its character writing is fairly straightforward, and the themes aren't hard to grasp.

I've talked about what makes Chainsaw Man unique among shonen before, but part of that equation is it being a shonen in the first place. It pushes the limits of what Weekly Shonen Jump has put out in the last decade or two, but all that did was raise the ceiling of what a manga in that specific magazine can be. ~~Its heights are also now the heights of Weekly Shonen Jump, rather than pushing past what could be considered shonen. As far as I can see, no aspect of Chainsaw Man pushes the limits so far that it can break away from its serialization as a shonen, to become a seinen—a feat that was already impossible by definition, without it changing magazines. Not only that, do you really believe that Chainsaw Man is so intense that it must be a seinen and yet Shueisha would put it in one of their shonen magazines and not one of their seinen magazines? No, this is a professional industry in which the publisher, editorial staff, and mangaka all know who they're aiming for and what audience they believe is best suited for the manga. If a manga is decided to be suitable for a teenage audience, then that content within said manga is designed with a teenage audience in mind—no matter what that may include.~~

Even with all that said, it's not just a matter of formality. I believe Shueisha put Chainsaw Man right where it belonged, it's kind of perfect for mid-to-late teenagers. Chainsaw Man is a fantastic shonen—I gave it a 10/10—but I think calling it too dark and mature to be a shonen is overselling it a tad. It has some mature ideas and it's fairly violent but, at the end of the day, it is a manga that will impress teenagers more than anyone. It's appealing to teens and adults alike, regardless of its mature, darker content, because it's also just a dumb action manga with "haha funnies." It's violent, crude, offensive, and well written but what about that couldn't be appealing to a teenager? You may disagree whether or not that content is truly appropriate for teenagers—that's a matter of perspective—but the serialization determines whether it is marketed for teens or not. Whatever content is within a shonen is created with that in mind. You might see it as more grown up than other shonen but it still has been marketed for a teenage audience for a reason. I certainly would have been enamored with it in my teens for those very reasons. I probably would have thought it was the coolest thing, next to Bleach.

In terms of thematic storytelling, Chainsaw Man is great but nothing about it screams "I can't be seen by anyone under 18." And, without trying to belittle what it does, I have to ask: Does Chainsaw Man say anything as profound as Berserk, Ghost in the Shell, Ping Pong, Space Brothers, Oyasumi Punpun, or any of Urasawa's works? I don't think so, personally. Comparatively, Chainsaw Man can be juvenile and silly. It's less of a slow burn, less meticulous and wordy than any of those

seinen. That isn't a bad thing, though. I think it fits perfectly into its place as a shonen manga, mostly because I think a lot of teenagers would dig it. It's a shonen because teenagers can get behind it but it doesn't need to be a seinen for adults to enjoy it as well.

I said before that the definition of shonen isn't malleable and that's true—a shonen will always be targeted at teenage boys—but that doesn't define who actually picks up the manga and starts reading it. Shueisha even reported that, as of 2019, 27.4% of Weekly Shonen Jump's audience is at least 25 years old, meaning a lot of adults are reading the magazine. Despite the target demographic being a younger age, no one should feel shame for liking shonen nor feel the need to elevate their favorite manga to be something it isn't. The demographic of a manga does not fully determine its level of maturity, if it has darker storytelling, or how good it is. All it determines is the suggested minimum age of entry and what age group would find it the most interesting. There is nothing wrong with your favorite shonen not being a seinen.