ENC 1102

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Hersey's Hiroshima and its Reception

The general American perception of Japanese people by the end of World War II in 1945 could be described as resulting from preexisting racist anti-Asian views, intensified by wartime propaganda that portrayed the "enemy" as "inferior … sub-human… and evil", with anti-Japanese propaganda in particular using racist tropes to reinforce the idea of Japanese people being "fundamentally different" (Sapre). This dehumanization of all could be used to justify attacks targeting civilians, such as the firebombing of many cities and atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Hersey's argument in *Hiroshima* could be described as implicit. The article is worded as a retelling of events, but the framing of those events from the perspective of Hiroshima survivors indirectly argues in favor of empathy and understanding towards them. This argument is meant to show the audience the excessive harm caused by the atomic bomb's attack; it does so both by describing the harm and suffering caused by the bomb, as well as by portraying the survivors as people who are not dissimilar to the audience. These claims would oppose both the dehumanization promoted by wartime propaganda, as well as claims that justified the atomic bomb as not particularly more harmful than prior bombs. Specifically, Hersey's audience is meant to believe that the attack on Hiroshima was exceptionally cruel when compared to other non-atomic attacks, and that the people who were its primary target were average civilians who did not deserve being subjected to such excessive suffering.

Hersey's rhetoric is shaped in many different ways that are meant to convince the audience of his claims. Throughout *Hiroshima,* he uses rhetorical appeals to create empathy for the survivors and show the devastation caused by the bomb. His decision to focus on six specific survivors and retelling the events of the attack from their perspective appeals towards *ethos*, or the credibility of the author. He introduces them to the audience as such: "A hundred thousand people were killed by the atomic bomb, and these six were among the survivors" (13). This works to strengthen the author's credibility by showing that the information Hersey presents comes directly from the people most connected to it. Additionally it reinforces the idea that instead of a nameless mass, each survivor is an individual person with their own story to tell; this in itself reinforces Hersey's credibility as he attempts to portray the victims both "objectively and sympathetically" (Yavenditti 48), and rather than 'making' the audience feel empathy for the victims he allows their own recollection of events to do so. This appeal towards credibility supports both of the aforementioned claims, as it encourages the audience to trust the honesty of both the information Hersey presents about the bomb and the experiences of the survivors shown. Essential to encouraging empathy from the audience towards the victims is his appeal towards *pathos,* or the reader's emotions, which is done throughout the article. The initial chapter establishes the survivors by recounting them going about their daily routines in the moments before the explosion, doing things such as waking up, eating breakfast, reading newspapers, going to work. It emphasizes personal traits, such as describing Mr. Tanimoto as someone who "moves nervously and fast, but with a restraint which suggests that he is a cautious, thoughtful man" (15). These descriptions of mundane life show the audience several ways in which they might be similar to the survivors; in the context of an American audience whose main exposure to Japanese people had been dehumanizing wartime propaganda,

reminding the reader of the victims' personhood and humanity would be particularly essential for the readers to overcome their preconceptions and feel empathy towards the victims. Additionally, the devastation caused by the bomb is emphasized as much of the survivors' lives are abruptly destroyed by something they could not have expected or understood at the time. A notable example is Ms. Nakamura, who was standing outside her house. As "everything flashed whiter than any white she had ever seen" she could only take one step before "something picked her up and she seemed to fly into the next room over the raised sleeping platform, pursued by parts of her house" (21); as she got up from the debris she heard a call for help from her child, still half buried, and rushed to her aid. This and other sections of the article contribute towards creating empathy by emphasizing the fear caused by an unexpected disaster, as well as the desperation of trying to ensure the safety of oneself and others in such a situation. These appeals to the readers' emotions serve primarily to reinforce the point that most of Hiroshima's residents were average citizens placed in extreme suffering by circumstances completely outside their control, through decisions made by people who would see them merely as another casualty out of hundreds of thousands. The third rhetorical appeal used by Hersey is *logos*, or an appeal to logic and reasoning. Although many aspects of the atomic bomb were unknown by the time of writing in 1946, Hersey used those which were known to distinguish the atomic bomb as significantly more destructive and harmful than other bombs. The article compares the explosion's effect at different distances; it describes how even two miles away there was barely enough time to notice and react to the explosion before being hit by the impact. This is indirectly compared to traditional bombs by some survivors' belief that "a bomb had fallen directly on" (18) the building they were in, while they were actually thousands of yards away from the explosion's center. Besides the physical damage being much greater, the atomic bomb is distinguished from

traditional bombs through the radiation sickness it caused to many of its victims. Many "apparently uninjured people" died hours or days after the explosion as "they had absorbed enough radiation to kill them" (102). The portrayal of the atom bomb's effects creates empathy of the survivors by showing the suffering to be on a significantly larger scale than the audience might expect victims of traditional bombing to have experienced, making it more difficult to justify as 'casualties of war'. Hersey's appeal to logic contributes the most to the claim that the atomic bombing was exceptionally cruel in comparison to other attacks on civilian towns or cities that the audience might be familiar with.

Despite its portrayal of the survivors' experiences, *Hiroshima* did not change the attitudes of a significant proportion of Americans towards the atomic bomb. Some have criticized qualities of the article such as it failing to directly "confront the morality of the bomb" (May 20), particularly the moral responsibility of the leaders who decided to use it. Yavenditti's article mentions this criticism, but claims that Hersey "struck precisely the right note" (48) as more direct criticism of U.S. decisionmakers would risk reducing the appeal to his audience. Instead, Yavenditti proposes that "the endurance of popular wartime attitudes" (48) could not be shifted by a single article, no matter how well written. He states that the shift of these attitudes would have to stem from the realization that other factors might be more important than 'military necessity' in the decision to carry out an attack, and that such a moral reevaluation would have "required more information than Hersey could supply" (49) at the time. He also notes that due to the United States' "temporary monopoly on the atomic bomb" (48) meant that at the time, American people would not have to consider themselves as potential targets of an atomic bomb.

Almost eighty years after these events, it is still important to talk about. Although atomic bombs haven't been used in deliberate attacks since those of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, their

development has continued and their destructive power has increased, and the citizens of those cities were not the final victims of atomic bombs. In 1946 the people of Bikini Atoll were forcibly relocated from their home so that the United States could perform nuclear tests, and were not able to return for decades; the nuclear tests performed from 1946 into the 1950s did not target people directly, but the nuclear fallout from a 1954 test traveled far enough to reach the Japanese fishing boat *Fifth Lucky Dragon* and other still-populated Marshallese islands, exposing the people in them to harmful levels of radiation which killed at least two people (Emery), (Niedenthal). The possibility for more harm continues into the present day too. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute has estimated there were over 12,000 nuclear bombs by the start of 2022, and the most powerful one that has been tested, *Tsar Bomba*, has been described as "nearly 4,000 times more powerful than the atomic bomb that destroyed Hiroshima" (Sechser). Additionally, attitudes that led to the justification of using the atomic bombs on civilians continue into the present day, with the killing of civilians being excused as 'collateral damage' in events such as the Kunduz hospital airstrike (Neuman). To understand the danger of these issues in the present day, the nuclear attacks of 1945 still serve as a crucial example of their potential consequences.

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