

Twentieth-
Century
Literature



From Yellow Peril to Japanese Wasteland: John Hersey's "Hiroshima"

Author(s): Patrick B. Sharp

Source: *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 46, No. 4, Literature and Apocalypse (Winter, 2000), pp. 434-452

Published by: [Hofstra University](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/827841>

Accessed: 17/10/2011 06:10

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Hofstra University is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Twentieth Century Literature*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

From Yellow Peril to Japanese Wasteland: John Hersey's "Hiroshima"

PATRICK B. SHARP

John Hersey's "Hiroshima" was first published in the August 31, 1946, issue of *The New Yorker*. A relatively liberal and sophisticated magazine, *The New Yorker* devoted its entire contents to Hersey's story that week, deleting its usual light-hearted cartoons and humorous editorials. The response was sensational: the text was republished in full by several newspapers, ABC radio broadcast a reading of the entire text over four nights, and the book version of the text became an immediate bestseller (Boyer, 203–05; Lifton and Mitchell 86–88; Weart 107–09). "Hiroshima" has remained in print continuously since its initial publication and has been required reading for generations of American high school and college students (Huse 35–36; Yavenditti 24–25). It is difficult to overstate the importance of Hersey's text in the history of the Atomic Age: as one reader of *The New Yorker* put it, Hersey showed the world "what one [atomic] bomb did to people as distinct from a city, the Japanese people or the enemy" (qtd. in Luft and Wheeler 137). The atomic bombing of Hiroshima provides a definitive example of a technology that radically alters history and challenges the prevailing view of the world. As a response to this technology, Hersey's "Hiroshima" struck a chord with a huge number of Americans, providing us with a unique and powerful example of how narrative structures arise to make sense out of new technologies. Using the "wasteland" imagery of literary modernism, Hersey encapsulated for his American audience the horror of the atomic bomb within a familiar framework. At the same time, Hersey criticized the widely held view that the atomic bomb was a justified, science-fiction-style attack against an evil and militaristic Yellow Peril.

In the year between the attack on Hiroshima and the publication of Hersey's story, American culture was engulfed in debates about the meaning of the atomic bomb. American newspapers, magazines, films, and radio programs were littered with representations of this new ultimate weapon, as Americans tried to make sense out of what this new technology really meant. So what was it about Hersey's text that made it so influential and that distinguished it from the scores of other representations that permeated American culture? Part of the answer to this question becomes evident when we look at the half-century before the atomic bomb was realized. As recent theories of genre have shown us, new discourses do not emerge out of thin air; rather, they draw on preexisting discursive structures to make sense of some new situation. A genre, which Todorov describes as a "historically attested codification of discursive properties" (19), functions as a discursive frame that arises to solve recurring communication problems faced by members of a community (Bazerman). The problem of representing the atomic bomb after the Hiroshima attack was vexing: the United States government used its monopoly on information about the new technology to greatly limit the possibilities for representing the attack. Yet both the government and the public had access to one preexisting genre that had in fact predicted the atomic bomb and given it a name. The genre was known as science fiction.

Science-fiction representations of the atomic bomb developed out of the future-war-story genre that became popular in the late nineteenth century. The popularity of future-war stories can be traced to May 1871, when an English military officer published a short story entitled "The Battle of Dorking" in the middle-class English monthly *Blackwood's Magazine*. As I. F. Clarke has shown, this short story caused an immediate sensation around the world and led to numerous imitations and controversies for years to come. More importantly, it established the future-war story (or what Clarke calls "the tale of the next great war" *Tale 1*) as a recognizable genre that still thrives in American culture today. The best-known example of the future-war story from this period is H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* (1898). As a genre, future-war stories meditated on the dangers of allowing your enemy to become more developed than you technologically. Also, the most popular future-war stories, such as "The Battle of Dorking" and *The War of the Worlds*, are narrated from the point of view of an "everyman" who witnesses the invasion of his country first hand. As the narrators struggle to survive, we get to witness the horror of the attack through their eyes, and come to loathe the enemy aliens that have so cruelly and unjustly invaded their country.

Wells returned to this genre several times, most significantly in 1914.

TWENTIETH CENTURY LITERATURE

With World War I imminent, he published the future-war novel *The World Set Free*. This novel coined the term *atomic bomb* and tells the story of a global war involving this powerful new weapon. The destruction he describes was unparalleled, with entire cities vanishing in the blink of an eye. Wells understood the strategic disadvantage of cities in an atomic war: with so many resources and such a high population density, urban centers become easy targets. His description of devastated urban centers and large-scale evacuations was not entirely new. In the earlier *War of the Worlds*, he imagines the panic and chaos that might accompany the evacuation of London and the corpse-ridden streets and broken buildings of the city itself. He takes this vision of urban destruction to an extreme in *The World Set Free*, where he recounts the death of urban centers as a cultural phenomenon. He also recounts the harnessing of atomic power, which eventually helps to build a new utopian world out of the ashes of the old. In *The World Set Free*, the destruction of cities leads to the collapse of the global infrastructure, so in the aftermath of the last war, Wells's global government institutes new, decentralized urban planning methods that also eliminate what he sees as the evils of urban life.

While the end of *The World Set Free* reinscribes Wells's belief in scientific progress, the specter of global destruction ultimately overpowers Wells's polemic and didactic account of the new world that arises from the ashes of destroyed cities. One crucial way this occurs is through Wells's choice of narrators: the first account of an atomic explosion in *The World Set Free* comes from the point of view of one of its victims. From the point of view of a young French secretary, the narrative describes the bomb that falls on the allied headquarters in Paris. As a sudden disruption of the everyday world, the flash of light serves as an ominous doppelgänger to the light of creation and of knowledge. The light of the atomic bomb brings with it death and destruction, not progress.

The influence of *The World Set Free* can be seen in the innumerable atomic rockets, atomic mutants, and atomic weapons from science fiction of the 1920s and 1930s. With the emergence of Hugo Gernsback's *Amazing Stories* in 1926, Wells became enshrined as one of the forefathers of science fiction. Several of Wells's shorter stories were reprinted in the first several issues of *Amazing Stories*, introducing a new generation of American readers and writers to his work. As science fiction began to develop in America, future-war stories came to be incorporated as one of the primary modes of the genre. However, while aliens from outer space were not uncommon in this mode, American authors tended more often to appeal to a different narrative tradition for their bad guys. In particular, Asians were singled out

as the great threat to America; thus, the Yellow Peril came to be a common feature of science-fiction stories.

Since the turn of the century, American authors had been writing future-war stories in which Asian invaders armed with superior technologies attack the United States. The most well-known story in this tradition was Jack London's "The Unparalleled Invasion." Published in 1910, London's story was a direct response to the victory of Japan's modernized army over the Russians in the Russo-Japanese war of 1905–06. London's story reinforced a stereotype of Japanese as inhuman, mindless drones who slavishly serve their emperor. In 1928, Gernsback's *Amazing Stories* published a short story by Philip Nowlan entitled "Armageddon 2419 AD." This story reinforced the image of Asians as mindless drones by contrasting them with the heroic Anthony "Buck" Rogers. Within two years, Nowlan had transformed his hero into a nationally syndicated comic strip that became known as *The Adventures of Buck Rogers in the 25th Century*. Nowlan's comic strip was widely popular, running for decades and spawning a host of imitators. Significantly, the action of *Buck Rogers* centers around a future invasion of the United States by the "Mongols." Buck's adventures take place among the remaining Americans who fight the Mongols for control of the country. Race emerges immediately as one of the central issues in the comic strip; in the third cell of the first installment of the strip, Buck sees a white woman fleeing from "half-breeds" (Nowlan and Calkins 1). He must repeatedly save the white woman from Mongols and half-breeds in a postapocalyptic America under Mongol control.

On January 7, 1933, King Features Syndicate started its own comic strip to compete with *Buck Rogers*. Called *Flash Gordon*, it became an immediate success (Harvey 124). It chronicled the adventures of the title character, an American polo player who fights the evil Ming the Merciless to protect the world from disaster. On Ming's home planet Mongo, Flash leads the opposition to this "tyrant of the universe" (Harvey 132). Universal Pictures purchased the film rights to a number of King Features comic strips, believing that the popularity of the strips would guarantee an audience for their films. In 1936, Universal produced the first of three movie serials based on the *Flash Gordon* comic strip; these serials were wildly successful and made "Flash Gordon" a household name (Kinnard 132–39). The third movie serial, *Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe* (1940), explicitly connects Ming the Merciless with the Axis powers. In a telling scene, Ming is discussing an experiment with his evil scientist that will kill "those intelligent enough to oppose" his quest for domination of the universe (Beebe and Taylor). One of the human subjects marked to die in the experiment condemns Ming for imprisoning him in one of Ming's "filthy concentration camps." For contempo-

rary audiences, Ming's quest for control of the universe and his use of concentration camps would have clearly associated him with both Nazi Germany and the Japanese empire.

These narratives of future war with the Yellow Peril became a primary way for the American media to make sense out of the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. While many in the United States denounced the Nazis for their racial ideology, a similar ideology was purveyed by Yellow Peril future-war stories such as *Buck Rogers* and *Flash Gordon*. Throughout the war, the Yellow Peril—in the form of the Japanese—was consistently represented in the United States media as an obedient, cruel, efficient, and homogenous “herd” that single-mindedly carried out Japanese leaders' dreams of global domination (Dower 17–21). In the weeks following the attack on Pearl Harbor, mainstream magazines such as *Life* and *Newsweek* carried articles on how to tell Japanese from Chinese. These articles reinscribed racial and cultural stereotypes of the Japanese, asserting that the Japanese had an “earthy yellow complexion” and that “Japs, like General Tojo, show the humorless intensity of ruthless mystics” (“How to Tell Japs” 82–83).¹ Events like the Bataan Death March in 1942 and the mass murder of civilians in Manila in 1945 served as powerful occasions for American propagandists to reinforce these stereotypes of the Japanese.

In *Buck Rogers* and *Flash Gordon*, stories always end with the Yellow Peril defeated by a superior weapon in the hands of a superior white hero. In contrast to the future-war stories of H. G. Wells, which never failed to show the impact of an ultimate weapon from the point of view of the victims, *Buck Rogers* and *Flash Gordon* always conclude from the point of view of the man pulling the trigger. With the Yellow Peril destroyed, balance is restored and the emancipated world can continue on its normal path (at least until the Yellow Peril comes back again). In its aftermath, Hiroshima was represented in America largely in the same manner. A number of commentators seemed to draw on the “revenge” trope of future-war stories and argued that the atomic bomb was justice coming back to haunt the Japanese for their many atrocities.² In his announcement of the bombing, President Truman set the tone for this revenge narrative with his assertion that “the Japanese began the war from the air at Pearl Harbor. They have been repaid many fold” (Cantelon 64–65). Numerous editorial cartoons in the days after August 6 showed stereotypical Japanese figures with slant eyes and buck teeth cowering beneath or being blown to pieces by the atomic bomb (Boyer 157). Despite the staggering casualties—early estimates cited 100,000 dead and 100,000 injured in the Hiroshima bombing—few voices in the United States were sympathetic to the Japanese. Even those few voices that did object to the use of the atomic bomb seemed more concerned with what it

meant for the future of humanity in general rather than what it had done to the Japanese in particular. Reports of the large numbers of dead and wounded did nothing to undermine the representation of the Japanese as an anonymous herd, a mass of mindless drones serving—and, in this case, dying for—their evil emperor.

In the aftermath of the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the US government engaged in a long and protracted battle to control narratives about the atomic bomb.³ The military controlled the press releases and all other information about the atomic bombings. In many ways, the stories from the front pages about the atomic bombings seemed to parallel the *Buck Rogers* and *Flash Gordon* stories on the comics pages. The US occupation force in Japan severely limited access to Hiroshima and Nagasaki throughout 1945, and as Monica Braw argues, engaged in a strict regime of censorship about the atomic bombings. One of the main reasons for this censorship was to ensure that reports placed blame for the horror of the war on the Japanese (Braw 133). In what Lifton and Mitchell refer to as “the official narrative” (xvi) of the atomic bomb, the US government did everything it could to promote the “revenge” aspect of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. Like *Buck Rogers’s* Mongols and *Flash Gordon’s* Ming the Merciless, the “Japs” had committed innumerable war crimes and therefore deserved to be destroyed by American superscience. The government (and the military in particular) also attempted to squelch or refute reports about the effects of the atomic bombs on humans, especially the devastating and lingering impact of radiation. Instead, the government attempted to focus media attention on descriptions of the initial blasts and the effects of the atomic bombs on inanimate objects. Limiting stories of radiation and human suffering served to limit sympathy for the Japanese. This helped to reinforce the representation of the victims at Hiroshima and Nagasaki as an anonymous Japanese herd in service to the emperor, a representation that derived from those in both science fiction and news stories that were popular before and during the war.

To help establish credibility for their press releases, the military hired William Laurence, the *New York Times* Pulitzer Prize-winning science writer, as the official reporter of the Manhattan Project. Laurence was allowed to witness the July 16 Trinity test and the Nagasaki bombing raid, and to write all of the articles released by the government about the development and use of the atomic bomb. In addition, Laurence wrote the original draft of the White House press release on Hiroshima that announced the development of the atomic bomb to the world (Weart 98–103). In the first paragraph of the press release, President Truman stressed, as we’ve seen, that “[t]he Japanese began the war from the air at Pearl Harbor. They have been

repaid many fold" (Cantelon 64). Throughout his articles, as well as in his best-selling book *Dawn Over Zero*, Laurence continued to represent the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as justified revenge against the Japanese (Boyer 185, 249). Like numerous other commentators, Laurence implied that the Japanese in Hiroshima and Nagasaki deserved no pity because of "Pearl Harbor and the Death March on Bataan" (234).

The US military seemed most concerned with suppressing or refuting stories that discussed human suffering in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Rather than detailing what had happened to Japanese civilians, the reports from Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the year following the attacks emphasized strategic damage to the buildings, bridges, and other war-related infrastructure. When bodies were discussed, the tone of the language was objective and medical. The first accounts of the atomic bombings, which came from Laurence and the crews of B-29s, focused on descriptions of the blasts themselves. This followed the pattern of the first wave of stories about the Trinity test, which were based on press releases written by Laurence. Though most of the newspaper stories about the atomic bomb were not credited to him, Laurence's releases were reprinted with only occasional and minor changes (Lifton and Mitchell 18–19). With the first news of the atomic bomb, newspapers around the country ran Laurence's account of the July 16 Trinity test in New Mexico on the front page. A report on page 1 of the August 7 *San Francisco Chronicle* focused in the first paragraph on the "ball of fire, many times brighter than the mid-day sun," that went "billowing skyward" when the atomic bomb was detonated at the Trinity test site ("Results of Experiment"). The next two paragraphs of the report listed the "vaporized" steel tower, "huge sloping crater," "heavy pressure wave," and "huge multi-colored cloud" as the other effects of the blast. A front-page *Los Angeles Times* article on the same day described a "blinding flash" and a "multi-colored cloud" that went "mushrooming" into the New Mexico sky ("Atom-Splitting" 1–2). Within a week, the narrative sequence of an atomic explosion became widely familiar: the flash of light, the ball of fire, and the mushroom cloud became firmly associated with the terrible new weapon. However, no mention was made about the effects of the blast on human bodies.

The eyewitness accounts of the atomic bomb blasts on Japan followed this same narrative pattern. On August 7, the crew of the *Enola Gay* gave the first eyewitness accounts of the Hiroshima blast. Navy Captain William Parsons talked about a "ball of fire" and a "mountain of smoke [that] was going up in a mushroom with the stem coming down" ("Superfort"). On August 11, the Associated Press released a story about eyewitness accounts of Nagasaki. Like the earlier stories of Hiroshima, the descriptions focused on the "immense fiery ball" and "column of billowing smoke" caused by the

explosion ("Eyewitness"). The August 12 *San Francisco Chronicle* devoted the upper-right fourth of the front page to a picture of the "smoke cloud" taken by the American military at Hiroshima, with the subtitle "Monument to Victory." The representation of the atomic bomb during this first week was literally from the point of view of the bombers; like Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon, Captain Paul Tibbets and the members of the flight crew were hailed as heroes who brought a swift end to the war with the Yellow Peril. Captain Robert A. Lewis, the copilot of the *Enola Gay*, made this connection clear when he commented that "what we saw made us feel that we were Buck Rogers twenty-fifth-century warriors" (Laurence 219).

After the Japanese surrender, the military began to filter reports and pictures of the damage from Hiroshima and Nagasaki to the media. The information that the government released was designed to make the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki seem no different from any of the other major bombings during the war. A retrospective article on the war in the August 20, 1945, issue of *Life* magazine was characteristic of the early media coverage of the atomic bombings. Entitled "The War Ends," the article was like many *Life* articles in that it was dominated by large photographs, with the text serving mainly as context for the striking images. The article begins with an artist's rendering of the "smoke" that billowed from the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, with text that glossed the final days of the war. The next two pages are dominated by large photos of the mushroom clouds over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, with the text emphasizing technical information about the blasts and the military nature of the targets. The next several pages present a series of aerial photos of bombed-out Japanese cities, concluding with "before" and "after" pictures of Hiroshima, which it describes as a "typically Oriental" city and "a military center" (25–31). The implications of the narrative in the article are clear: Hiroshima and Nagasaki were military targets, and the effects of the atomic bombs were no different from the effects of the conventional bombs that devastated other Japanese cities.

Despite the efforts of the US government to control the emerging narrative about the atomic bomb, other narratives began to appear early on in the official version of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. Japanese media reports, which were excerpted in American newspapers, characterized the Hiroshima bombing as "designed to massacre innocent civilians" ("Jap Cabinet"). The Japanese reports also carried eyewitness accounts of the aftermath of the atomic bombings. One such account, quoted in the August 20, 1945, issue of *Newsweek*, graphically described the bodies of some victims: "All around I found dead and wounded. Some were bloated and scorched—such an awesome sight—their legs and bodies stripped of clothes and burned with a huge blister" ("Targets of Fate"). While such accounts

were reported in the media, they did not represent the atomic bomb as significantly different from other weapons. For example, the burns and blisters on the bodies of the Japanese victims could have been made by incendiary bombs just as easily as by atomic bombs.

As time wore on, however, reports began to surface about a unique effect of the atomic bomb: radiation sickness. These reports tarnished the glorious victory of America's "Buck Rogers twenty-fifth-century warriors," as the effects of the atomic bomb lasted long after the Japanese surrender. A number of sensational articles and reports about Hiroshima and Nagasaki foregrounded the lingering effects of the atomic bomb. Radiation was cited as the cause of the mysterious illness that killed seemingly uninjured survivors weeks after the blast. A report in the September 17, 1945, issue of *Time* magazine noted that "since the atom bomb hit Hiroshima, Jap reports have played on the US conscience with reports of weird, agonized deaths of civilians who had appeared untouched by the explosion" ("Atomic Footprint"). By emphasizing the effects of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki attacks on civilians, these reports challenged the representation of the Japanese as a militaristic Yellow Peril who deserved to be atom-bombed. They were denounced by some members of the military—most notably by General Leslie Groves, the military head of the Manhattan Project—as unsubstantiated "Jap propaganda" designed to manipulate world opinion and generate sympathy for the defeated Japanese people (Boyer 188–89; Lifton and Mitchell 44–45; Weart 108; Yavenditti 27). General Groves even commented that, according to doctors, "[radiation sickness] is a very pleasant way to die" (qtd. in Yavenditti 27). However, an increasing number of credible eyewitnesses testified to the unspeakable torment of radiation sickness. In testimony before the Senate Special Committee on Atomic Energy in December 1945, Dr. Philip Morrison described in detail the effects of radiation sickness on civilians he witnessed during his visit to Hiroshima. The entire transcript of Morrison's testimony was reprinted in the February 11, 1946, issue of *The New Republic*, where his credibility was underscored by his role "as an atomic physicist who worked on the bomb project at Chicago and Los Alamos and on the Marianas" (177). Military conservatives like Major Alexander de Seversky continued to argue that "the effects of the atom bombs . . . had been wildly exaggerated," and that radiation sickness was a minor cause of death at Hiroshima and Nagasaki (121, 124).⁴ But finally, two major challenges emerged to the official justified-revenge narrative of the atomic bomb: The United States Strategic Bombing Survey's official report on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and John Hersey's "Hiroshima."

The United States Strategic Bombing Survey (USSBS) originated from a directive by President Roosevelt to survey impartially the impact of the

aerial attacks on Germany. After the war in the Pacific ended, President Truman requested that the Bombing Survey conduct a similar survey of Japan. Involving more than 1,150 people, the Bombing Survey contained a number of military and civilian experts on architecture, economics, engineering, medicine, and several other fields, and established subheadquarters in both Hiroshima and Nagasaki (USSBS iii; Lifton and Mitchell 82–83). The Bombing Survey released some preliminary findings in late February 1946, which were reported in such magazines as *Time* and *Life*. The March 4, 1946, issue of *Time* lists a number of effects on human bodies by atomic bombs and notes that the Bombing Survey's findings contradict earlier comments by "military conservatives" ("What Happened" 90). An article entitled "Atom Bomb Effects" in the March 11, 1946, issue of *Life* shows medical drawings of the human body being penetrated by gamma rays and lists a number of the symptoms of radiation sickness. However, the images were faceless and impersonal, and looked like standard drawings from a medical textbook. This "objective" representation of the radiation effects of the atomic bomb, while disturbing, did not convey any of the horror and pain induced in the victims.⁵ On June 30, 1946, the Bombing Survey released its final report, entitled *The Effects of Atomic Bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki*. The complete text of the report was republished in the July 5, 1946, issue of *U.S. News* and received a fair amount of publicity. However, as Lifton and Mitchell point out, the publicity for the report was overshadowed by the atomic bomb tests at Bikini atoll in early July (83).

The Bombing Survey report reinforced much of the official narrative in its representation of the Japanese as an anonymous herd and its discussion of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as military targets. Nonetheless, the findings of the report were startling and clearly refuted the dismissive claims of military conservatives regarding radiation. Where General Groves and Major de Seversky dismissed radiation as a cause of death, the Bombing Survey report graphically details the delayed effects of initial exposure during an atomic blast. However, no individual cases of radiation sickness are discussed in any detail. The report provides a frank and disturbing account of radiation's effects on the human body. But despite confronting the issue of radiation sickness head on, the Bombing Survey reinforces key aspects of the official narrative. The images that accompany the report are of the effects of the blast on structures. The report gives only one photo of a Japanese victim of the atomic bombs. The photo, which shows some superficial burns on a Japanese soldier, reinforces the official story that Hiroshima and Nagasaki were military targets (USSBS 16).

Centralized military censorship most likely played a major role in dictating the ideology of the Bombing Survey report. A clear example of this

ensorship is the story of Lieutenant Daniel McGovern of the Bombing Survey. McGovern was a young officer who made a one-hour documentary entitled *The Effects of the Atomic Bombs Against Hiroshima and Nagasaki* with Japanese filmmaker Akira Iwasaki. The documentary was put together in part with footage shot by Iwasaki immediately after the attack; this footage had originally been seized by occupation censors, and Iwasaki and his crew had been held in military custody. After getting Iwasaki and his crew out of custody, McGovern had them shoot thousands of feet of additional footage. The film extensively documented the effects of the atomic bomb on human bodies. After McGovern and Iwasaki completed the documentary, they sent it back to the Pentagon, where it was labeled "Top Secret" and locked away for 22 years (Lifton and Mitchell 57–59). This incident indicates that the military, while willing to allow a written discussion of radiation sickness, was not willing to allow the Bombing Survey or anyone else to release images of Japanese radiation sickness victims. In general, the documents released to the public at the time, including the Bombing Survey's report, maintained the point of view of the bomber and perpetuated the narrative that Hiroshima was a military base that deserved to be bombed.

This was the historical moment where Hersey's text intervened to undermine the official narrative of the Hiroshima bombing. Using the wasteland imagery of high modernism, Hersey appealed to a familiar literary landscape to help make sense of what happened at Hiroshima. In this way, Hersey wrote against the grain of the official narrative of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Yellow Peril stories of science fiction.⁶ Hersey had conducted his research in an April 1946 visit to Hiroshima, where he interviewed dozens of survivors (Lifton and Mitchell 87; Sanders 41). He studied available technical information about the atomic bomb, including the preliminary reports of the Bombing Survey. Also, Hersey did not at any point submit his writing to the government for censorship clearance, though it was common practice for reporters visiting occupied Japan to do so (Stone 6; Yavenditti 35–36). As a reporter on the front lines of some of the action in World War II, Hersey had avoided the racist vilification of the Japanese that characterized the writing of many other reporters.⁷ Visiting the devastation of Hiroshima and talking to survivors after the war had a profound impact on Hersey. He later commented, "I felt I would like to write about what happened not to buildings but to human beings . . . and I cast about for a way to find a form for that" (qtd. in Lifton and Mitchell 87–88). Here Hersey articulates what he felt was missing from the official narrative of the atomic bomb: an account of the attack from the point of view of the victims.⁸

Eventually, Hersey decided to use the narrative structure of Thornton

HERSEY'S "HIROSHIMA"

Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, which recounted the events of a natural disaster from the point of view of the victims (Lifton and Mitchell 87). Hersey was also heavily influenced by the imagery of literary modernism, which provided a familiar vocabulary for discussing the effects of war and technology on individuals. Hersey decided to focus his narrative on six survivors who would appeal to the pathos of the American audience, and who implicitly undermined the representation of the Japanese as a fanatical, militaristic Shinto horde.⁹ Two of the survivors were Christian clergymen, who underscore through their actions that Christian love and sacrifice are very important for many Japanese. One survivor was a widowed mother of three, whose experience of the bomb is characterized by her concern for the health of her children, and another was a female office worker. The final two survivors in Hersey's text are doctors, who have to contend with the human cost of the collapse of Hiroshima's infrastructure and who document the details of radiation sickness. Overall, Hersey's narrative explores the unspoken and obscured implications of the detached and "objective" government narrative of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima by foregrounding the suffering of individual human subjects.

The official narrative of the atomic bomb had become familiar to Americans by mid-1946, with the progression from a flash of light to a ball of fire, to a mushroom cloud, to a detached and scientific discussion of blast effects. The title of the first section, "The Noiseless Flash," seems to indicate that Hersey's narrative will follow the sequence of the official narrative. And in fact Hersey does incorporate the narrative structure of the official version, moving from the flash of light to the ball of fire and the mushroom cloud, and finally to an analysis of the blast effects of the bomb. However, the blast effects that Hersey details relate to the daily lives that were shattered by the atomic bomb and to the subsequent struggle for survival. The first section begins with a brief introduction to the narrative's main characters—a statement about what each of the characters was doing "at the moment when the atomic bomb flashed above Hiroshima" (15). After the introductions, Hersey gives us a longer version of each character's activities on that morning of August 6, 1945. The reader knows that the detonation of the bomb is imminent, a knowledge that casts an air of drama and pathos over each of the ensuing stories. The reader understands that the various hardships that cloud the characters' lives will soon be overshadowed by a basic and horrible struggle for survival. Using an omniscient, journalistic narrative voice, Hersey takes the time to develop each character and his or her hopes and hardships before the attack. The irony of the details is palpable: a story about the atomic bomb begins with the banality of everyday life. In this way Hersey immediately turns the narrative away from the atomic

bomb itself and toward an exploration of subjective human experience.

Hersey's repeats the official narrative of the atomic bomb several times, but each time foregrounds the subjective experience of the victims and moves the objective language of blast effects into parenthetical comments. This clarifies the detachment and triviality of the official narrative. When the flash of light comes, it completely shatters the lives of the characters in "Hiroshima." Hersey describes the flash six times, once from each character's point of view. The flash interrupts the stories of these characters' lives; Hersey evinces this interruption by inserting the flash in the middle of sentences and paragraphs. The widow sees the flash while in her kitchen, for example, where she is preparing a meal for her children and watching her neighbor tear down his house:¹⁰ "As Mrs. Nakamura stood watching her neighbor, everything flashed whiter than any white she had ever seen" (17). In the official government narrative, the flash of light from the atomic bomb is followed by a description of the atomic fireball, the shock wave, and damage to particular structures. While Hersey parenthetically notes the proximity of each character to ground zero, he does not describe the explosion any further. Rather, he moves on to describe the survivors' immediate perceptions of the damage. Mrs. Nakamura

had taken a single step (the house was 1,350 yards, or three-quarters of a mile, from the center of the explosion) when something picked her up and she seemed to fly into the next room over the raised sleeping platform, pursued by parts of her house. (17)

Rather than simply describing the damage to the house, Hersey immerses his reader in a particular human experience of the explosion. The blast has not simply damaged a house; it has also destroyed the widow's home, and buried her and her three children in the debris. While Hersey incorporates the scientific detail and objective tone of the official narrative—here exemplified by his parenthetical notation of the house's distance from ground zero—he goes to great pains to show the story behind the numbers and rhetoric of texts like the Bombing Survey reports. In the descriptions of the atomic blast, Hersey makes no mention of the fireball and mentions the mushroom cloud only once. The oblique reference emphasizes the effects of the cloud on the survivors rather than engaging in a detailed description: "Under what seemed to be a local dust cloud, the day grew darker and darker" (16).

At one point midway through the text, Hersey explicitly contrasts his own narrative with the official accounts of Hiroshima. After quoting extensively from President Truman's original announcement about Hiroshima, Hersey comments that

HERSEY'S "HIROSHIMA"

even if [the survivors] had known the truth, most of them were too busy or too weary or too badly hurt to care that they were the objects of the first great experiment in the use of atomic power, which (as the voices on the radio shouted) no country except the United States, with its industrial know-how, its willingness to throw two billion gold dollars into an important wartime gamble, could possibly have developed. (33)

Here Hersey directly undermines the nationalistic rhetoric of Truman's announcement. The specter of scientific experimentation with human subjects still haunted the postwar world; Nazi and Japanese scientists and doctors had been widely condemned for such wartime atrocities. In this passage, Hersey directs this same criticism at the United States, implicitly condemning the Hiroshima attack as a "great experiment" on human subjects. The official narrative of the Manhattan Project—with its representations of heroic scientists, American ingenuity, and economic might—becomes a hollow and cruel boast in this passage. In the progression of Hersey's narrative, the suffering of the victims of Hiroshima makes us see the narrowness of the official narrative. The heroes that emerge from Hiroshima are not scientists and bomber pilots but rather the doctors and clergymen who tend the wounded and injured, and the victims of the atomic bomb who somehow manage to live on.

While focusing on the experiences and suffering of these victims, Hersey does not ignore the landscape of the devastated city. Rather, he appropriates the imagery of literary modernism to describe it. For the relatively well-read audience of the *New Yorker*, this imagery would have been quite familiar, and it provided a powerful antidote to the science-fiction-like stories of American heroes conquering the Yellow Peril. Indeed, his spare, objective, direct prose is strikingly similar to that of Hemingway, who was himself a journalist for many years.

Like Hemingway's, Hersey's imagery seems to be most clearly indebted to Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Throughout "Hiroshima," Hersey juxtaposes images of fire, death, and desolation with images of water and rebirth. However, as in Eliot's poem, they do not evoke the natural life-death-rebirth cycle of the Fisher King myth (one of the primary sources for *The Waste Land*).¹¹ Rather, the cycle of nature seems out of balance, as the sources of life (such as water) now cause illness and death. Like the characters of Eliot's poem, the victims of the atomic bomb cannot alleviate their suffering with water. Throughout *The Waste Land*, dust suggests sterility; without water, the desiccated ground cannot bring forth life. At the same time, excessive amounts of water repeatedly cause death in the poem. The imbalance of water and dust in *The Waste Land* is symptomatic of a world that has become broken.

Physically, morally, and culturally, the modern world seems to be irreparably damaged in some way. Hersey exploits this imagery to describe the effects of the atomic bomb. While never using the “mushroom” metaphor of the official narrative, Hersey refers to the atomic cloud as “clouds of dust,” “a local dust cloud,” and “a local column of dust” that “turned [the day] dark” and made “the day [grow] darker and darker” (16, 18–19). The images of the dust cloud are juxtaposed with descriptions of excessive and unnatural rain:

Houses nearby were burning, and when huge drops of water the size of marbles began to fall, [Reverend Tanimoto] half thought that they must be coming from the hoses of firemen fighting the blazes. (They were actually drops of condensed moisture falling from the turbulent tower of dust, heat, and fission fragments that had already risen miles into the sky above Hiroshima.) (20)

Later, “abnormally large” drops of rain fall on victims as they lie in an evacuation area (25). As Hersey implies in this passage and in the final section of the text, the rain is also highly radioactive.

The specter of “death by water” that hangs over *The Waste Land* also manifests itself in “Hiroshima” as victims fleeing the fires that engulf the city are confronted with the danger of drowning. In this regard, the second section of “Hiroshima”—entitled “The Fire”—seems to echo the third and fourth sections of *The Waste Land*, “The Fire Sermon” and “Death by Water.” “The Fire Sermon” begins:

The river’s tent is broken; the last fingers of leaf
Clutch and sink into the wet bank. The wind
Crosses the brown land, unheard. (ll. 173–75)

The section closes with the image of Carthage in flames, and repeats the word “burning” five times (ll. 307–08, 311). “Death by Water,” which is only ten lines long, focuses on the image of a sailor who has drowned in the sea. But here, water doesn’t quench the fires of the burning city or heal “the brown land” but rather engulfs and destroys life.

Implicit references to *The Waste Land* pervade “Hiroshima.” The second section of “Hiroshima” begins with the observations of Reverend Tanimoto. In the passages discussed above, the fires of burning houses are not quenched by the unnatural rain from the dust cloud. As the section progresses, the conflagration leads to increasingly vicious winds and strange weather phenomena. Eliot’s “river tent” is “broken”; Dr. Fujii awakens from the blast to discover that his home has been blown into the river. The doctor finds himself pinned between two beams that hold his head above the water of the river. However, he soon realizes that he will drown when the

tide comes in if he doesn't free himself. Ironically, Dr. Fujii is threatened by drowning while flames grow all around him.

A number of the other survivors flee to a park, which serves as an evacuation center. Described in idyllic, pastoral terms, the park contrasts strongly with the devastated city:

[Asano Park] was far enough away from the explosion so that its bamboos, pines, laurel, and maples were still alive, and the green place invited refugees . . . partly because the foliage seemed a center of coolness and life. . . . (24)

The refuge that the park provides is only temporary, however, as the "abnormally large" drops of radioactive rain soon begin to fall (25). Indeed, even the apparently inviting river turns out to be poisonous: as Mrs. Nakamura and her children arrive at the park, "They all felt terribly thirsty, and they drank from the river. At once they were nauseated and began vomiting, and they retched the whole day" (24).

In perhaps the most gruesome and moving passages of the text, wasteland imagery again plays a central role. The Christian clergymen—Reverend Tanimoto and Father Kleinsorge—attempt to ease the suffering of many of the victims they encounter by bringing them water. In Christianity, water serves as a source of purification and succor; in the ceremony of baptism, water serves to "wash away the sins" of individuals and to bring them peace and a new life. The water that the two clergymen bring, however, seems inadequate to the scale of suffering they encounter:

Mr. Tanimoto's way around the fire took him across the East Parade Ground, which, being an evacuation area, was now the scene of a gruesome review: rank on rank of the burned and bleeding. Those who were burned moaned, "*Mizu, mizu!* Water, water!" Mr. Tanimoto found a basin in a nearby street and located a water tap that still worked . . . and he began carrying water to the suffering strangers. When he had given drink to about thirty of them, he realized that he was taking too much time. . . . Then he ran away. He went to the river again, the basin in his hand. . . . There he saw hundreds of people so badly wounded that they could not get up to go farther from the burning city. When they saw a man erect and unhurt, the chant began again: "*Mizu, mizu, mizu.*" Mr. Tanimoto could not resist them; he carried them water from the river—a mistake, since it was tidal and brackish. (23)

This "gruesome review" evokes the procession of the damned, abject in their suffering, that begins *The Waste Land*. Like many of the characters in Eliot's poem, the victims in this passage long for water; however, the water pro-

vides only temporary relief, or even worsens their condition. As Reverend Tanimoto moves through the landscape of Hiroshima, he is continually confronted with masses of people whose condition becomes signified by a single chant: "water." No matter how much water the clergyman brings, the suffering continues. Several passages like this humanize the collapse of the city's infrastructure, which had been objectively catalogued in the official US government narrative. Without adequate doctors, medical facilities, and transportation, the clergymen heroically struggle to save lives and ease the pain of the victims. The scale of the disaster overwhelms even Christian mercy in Hersey's narrative.

After "Hiroshima," the vast majority of atomic-bomb stories focused on the human cost of warfare from the point of view of the bombing victims. While the official narrative of the atomic blasts remained familiar, most atomic-bomb stories used the flash of light, the atomic fireball, the shockwave, and the mushroom cloud only as a brief precursor to the body of the narrative. Exploring human survival in the postattack wasteland became the dominant mode of atomic-bomb storytelling. For many Americans, the *hibakusha*—the Japanese survivors of the atomic bombs—became archetypes for the human condition in the Atomic Age. What happened to them could (and probably would) happen to us; their story would soon be our own. In the growing climate of nuclear fear, "Hiroshima" emerged as the nonfiction basis for countless fictional explorations of American culture. "Hiroshima" had transformed the Japanese Yellow Peril into the sympathetic victims of the atomic bomb, and had transformed the narrative landscape of America.

NOTES

¹ Periodical articles listed alphabetically by title do not show bylines. These omissions may have to do with war and postwar censorship of sensitive information. Many articles were written by authors working with the government, who were not credited in bylines for security reasons.

² For a representative example of this kind of commentary, see the editorial from the *Los Angeles Times* entitled "Howls of Jap Anguish Betray Heavy Bomb Damage."

³ For a more extensive discussion of US government attempts to control information about the atomic bomb, see Lifton and Mitchell 3–114 and Braw.

⁴ For a more complete discussion, see Yavenditti 27–28.

⁵ What is perhaps most striking about these medical images, however, involves the advertisement that was printed next to them. This advertisement showed three photographs of smartly dressed white Americans enjoying Pepsi-Cola. The tryptic of medical images is mirrored by a tryptic of photos in the layout of the pages. The stylish and successful image conveyed by the advertis-

ing photos provides a surreal and poignant contrast to the anonymous and isolated textbook image of the radiation victim.

⁶ I want to underscore that I am not trying to engage in a high- vs. low-culture argument here. In many ways, science-fiction publications became the center for resisting and undermining official military narratives about nuclear war during the post-World War II years and used Hersey's "Hiroshima" as a model for how to do this. What I am trying to show is that one specific type of science-fiction narrative—that which used the Yellow Peril as an antagonist for action heroes—played a role in how the government represented the atomic bombing of Japan. This representation was driven by widely accepted cultural stereotypes that John Hersey rejects.

⁷ For a discussion of racism in World War II reporting, see Dower 77–82.

⁸ In this regard Hersey was returning to the original representation of the atomic bomb by H. G. Wells, who also showed the atomic explosion from the point of view of the victims. At the same time, Hersey seems to have been much more influenced by modernists such as Eliot than by the premodernist Wells.

⁹ For a discussion of the "Shinto" representation of the Japanese, see Dower 20–21.

¹⁰ The authorities had ordered him to tear down his house to create a fire-break in case of firebombing attacks like those on Tokyo.

¹¹ See introductory note and footnote to line 46 in *The Waste Land*.

WORKS CITED

- "Atom-Splitting Test By Science Group Disclosed." *Los Angeles Times* Aug. 7, 1945, pt. 1: 1–2.
- "Atomic Bomb Effects." *Life* Mar. 11, 1946: 91–92, 94.
- "Atomic Footprint." *Time* Sep. 17, 1945: 68.
- Bazerman, Charles. "Genre as Habitat for Social Action." Delivered paper, Modern Language Association, 1994.
- Beebe, Ford, and Roy Taylor. *Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe*. Movie serial. Universal Pictures, 1940.
- Boyer, Paul. *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age*. New York: Pantheon, 1985.
- Braw, Monica. *The Atomic Bomb Suppressed: American Censorship in Occupied Japan*. Armonk: Sharpe, 1991.
- Cantelon, Philip L., et al., eds. "Press Release on Hiroshima, Aug. 6, 1945." US White House. *The American Atom*, 2nd ed. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1991. 64–67.
- Clarke, I. F., ed. *The Tale of the Next Great War, 1871–1914: Fictions of Future Warfare and of Battles Still-to-Come*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1995.
- . *Voices Prophesying War 1763–1984*. New York: Oxford UP, 1966.
- De Seversky, Alexander P. "Atomic Bomb Hysteria." *Reader's Digest* Feb. 1946: 121–26.
- Dower, John. *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*. New York: Pantheon, 1986.
- Eliot, T. S. *The Waste Land*. 1922. New York: Harcourt, 1988.

TWENTIETH CENTURY LITERATURE

- "Eyewitness of Nagasaki Bombing: 'Like Looking Over the Rim of a Volcano'" *San Francisco Chronicle* Aug. 11, 1945: 3.
- Harvey, Robert C. *The Art of the Funnies: An Aesthetic History*. Jackson: U of Mississippi P, 1994.
- Hersey, John. "Hiroshima." *The New Yorker* Aug. 31, 1946.
- "How to Tell Japs From the Chinese." *Life* Dec. 22, 1941. 82-83.
- "Howls of Jap Anguish Betray Heavy Bomb Damage." *Los Angeles Times* Aug. 8, 1945: 4.
- Huse, Nancy L. *The Survival Tales of John Hersey*. Troy: Whitston, 1983.
- "Jap Cabinet Reported Called in Bomb Crisis." *Los Angeles Times* Aug. 8, 1945, pt. 1: 2.
- Kinnard, Roy. *Fifty Years of Serial Thrills*. Metuchen: Scarecrow, 1983.
- Laurence, William L. *Dawn Over Zero*. New York: Knopf, 1946.
- Lifton, Robert Jay, and Greg Mitchell. *Hiroshima in America: A Half-Century of Denial*. New York: Avon, 1996.
- Luckmann, Thomas. "On the Communicative Adjustment of Perspectives, Dialogue, and Communicative Genres." *Dialogue Alternative*. Ed. Astri Heen Wold. Oslo: Scandinavian UP, 1992.
- Luft, Joseph, and W. M. Wheeler. "Reaction to John Hersey's 'Hiroshima.'" *Journal of Social Psychology* 28 (Aug. 1948): 135-40.
- "Monument to Victory." Photo and caption. *San Francisco Chronicle* Aug. 12, 1945: 1.
- Morrison, Philip. "Beyond Imagination." *The New Republic* Feb. 11, 1946: 177-80.
- Nowlan, Philip, and Dick Calkins. *The Collected Works of Buck Rogers in the 25th Century*. Ed. Robert C. Dille. New York: Chelsea, 1969.
- "Results of Experiment—Steel Tower Vaporized, Fire Ball at 40,000 Feet." *San Francisco Chronicle* Aug. 7, 1945: 1.
- Sanders, David. *John Hersey*. New York: Twayne, 1967.
- Stone, Albert E. *Literary Aftershocks: American Readers, Writers, and the Bomb*. New York: Maxwell Macmillan, 1994.
- "Superfort Crew Describes Terrific Flash and Blast: 'A Mountain of Smoke.'" *San Francisco Chronicle* Aug. 8, 1945: 1.
- "Targets of Fate." *Newsweek* Aug. 20, 1945: 22.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. *Genres in Discourse*. Trans. Catherine Porter. New York: Cambridge UP, 1990.
- United States Strategic Bombing Survey (USSBS). *The Effects of Atomic Bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki*. Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1946.
- "The War Ends." *Life* Aug. 20, 1945. 25-31.
- Wear, Spencer. *Nuclear Fear: A History*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1988.
- Wells, H. G. *The World Set Free: A Story of Mankind*. New York: Dutton, 1914.
- "What Happened." *Time* Mar. 4, 1946: 88, 90.
- Yavenditti, Michael J. "John Hersey and the American Conscience: The Reception of 'Hiroshima.'" *Pacific Historical Review* 43.1 (Feb. 1974): 24-49.