

John Hersey's
Hiroshima
Theme Analysis

Most reports of the first use of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan, described it as a big, exciting explosion that ended the war and should be celebrated and praised. Journalist John Hersey's non-fiction account of the bombing, "*Hiroshima*," shared a different perspective that atomic warfare has horrifying, profound, and long-lasting impacts on individuals.

Hersey tells this story by setting a tone of horror. One example of this is when he writes how Miss Sasaki "was grateful until he brought two horribly wounded people—a woman with a whole breast sheared off and a man whose face was all raw from a burn—to share the simple shed with her. No one came back. The rain cleared and the cloudy afternoon was hot; before nightfall the three grotesques under the slanting piece of twisted iron began to smell quite bad" (*Two: The Fire*). Hersey builds the tone of horror by making the diction choice of referring to the injured people as "grotesques." The detailed and gory descriptions of injuries suffered by the bomb victims further builds on the horror. We also see this in the excerpt when Miss Sasaki is at first grateful to those who helped her, but then becomes horrified when they bring two very injured people to shelter with her. The sense of abandon when no one came back to check on her also adds to the horror.

Hersey's diction choices use words that create empathy between the reader and the story. He writes how Mr. Tanimoto "lifted the slimy living bodies out and carried them up the slope away from the tide. He had to keep consciously repeating to himself, 'These are human beings'" (*Three: Details are Being Investigated*). Describing the victims as "slimy" gives the reader a very vivid image of how the people would have looked and further enforces the horrifying affects of nuclear warfare. Hersey begins by referring to the bomb victims merely as "living bodies" and not people. However later in the excerpt, Mr. Tanimoto's repeated mantra of "these are human beings" reminds the reader that, like them, the

Japanese bomb victims were in fact people too, and not just “living bodies.” This creates a greater sense of empathy, as it forces the reader to think about what it would be like if they were in Mr. Tanimoto’s situation.

Finally, Hersey’s method of development is unique to this topic, as it tells the stories of six individuals who filled diverse roles within the community, opposed to the “God’s eye” perspective of most reports at the time. By focusing on individual people, Hersey shows the reader how we they were just normal citizens going about their daily lives, just as we are. He takes the reader through the timeline of the bombing, starting with detailing their daily lives, then describing the immediate events after the bomb dropped and the long-lasting impacts the bomb had on people’s lives. These long-lasting effects included many health issues, including impacts on children. For example: “some exposed children were growing up stunted, and one of the most shocking findings was that some children who had been in their mothers’ womb at the time of the bombing were born with heads smaller than normal” (*Five: The Aftermath*). It’s particularly horrifying to think of children suffering and illustrates that the effects of atomic warfare extend into future generations.

Overall, John Hersey sets a tone of horror, which is strengthened by graphic descriptions of the bomb’s impacts and how they continued to affect survivors long-term. He makes the story personal by focusing on individuals, which creates a sense of empathy within the reader, leading them to consider whether the human impacts were worth the use of the atomic bomb to end the war.