

Hiroshima: Humming the Day's Small Aches and Pleasures

But mostly I don't feel / that way anymore – just those few minutes late at night / when I am tired and for a moment outside and then / life resumes in a kind of flooding that I recognize / as my lifetime, broken as anyone's, the pieces floating up, / the one that knows I could have been that drunk, / the weedy smell of the river in late afternoon, the crickets / humming the day's small aches and pleasures in this, / my present – which if I've learned anything, I've learned / is never possible without the past.

What is your history? Please don't leave / without telling me.

There has to be a place for that in the collective memory of the tribe – orphaned children, playing baseball, swinging old bones as a choked, blooded sunset falls on a small, scalded corner of the world.

It's tough to gauge a piece of art's impact in retrospect, in no small part because truly revolutionary works influence those who follow. If you're exposed to the influenced before the influence itself, you're likelier than not to familiarize yourself with it first. *That* piece becomes the thing that strikes you as groundbreaking. So someone weaned on a steady diet of late-90s and 00s-era alternative rock can still throw an early LP from Nirvana, Pearl Jam, or Soundgarden on his turntable...but the songs on each, apart from being strikingly well-crafted and well-played, don't necessarily sound like anything that's all that special. The listener's heard so many iterations of that sound that those who set the archetypal mold – those who broke the old molds, at that – just sound like bands.

This conundrum challenges virtually every high-school English teacher. Most of the works that have been approved for curricular use are, frankly, old. It's not easy to find pieces from the past sixty years on our state's list. And of those that *are* present, many of them conform to older models of storytelling; relatively little of what's currently pushing our field forward finds itself represented here. (This was also why I found some of my collegiate readings so jarring – *Wait, we can write like this now?*)

There's no easy division point between the old stuff and the new, mostly because the new is perpetually becoming the old (even if we're a little slow to catch up). We've done a pretty good job of breaking the field into generally-defined movements – there's the Modernists, the post-Modernists, etc. – that signal shifts in what most people are trying to accomplish, usually in response to what's happening to the world around them. The Modernists, for example, responded to the whiplash shifts that defined their “lost generation” (peace, World War I, Roaring 20s) by retreating into linguistic experiments that often fixated on feeling lost, isolated, broken, confused, or left behind – fairly accurate depictions of how it must have felt to realize the world you're tasked with inheriting is coming to you pre-fractured. The post-Modernists, especially after yet another world war, took it even further, expanding the Modernists' reshaping of language and structure while questioning the very idea that a creator could endow his or her art with inherent meaning (i.e., possibly separate from what their audience could perceive).

This isn't to say that twentieth-century (and twenty-first, for that matter) literature is defined by chaos, as though Loki stole all of our pens. But it was defined, probably in larger part than you've realized, by a willingness to challenge, to mess with the established norms of their predecessors. And it's that quality that I want to focus on in our *Hiroshima* work – the idea that a changing world demands new ways of grappling with it, that our societal situations are growing too complex for our old expressions and assumptions...that, in some ways, for all our technological expansion, free access to information, and sometimes-sociopathic tendency to express whatever we want however we wish, we still don't know how to talk about what we need to talk about.

Hiroshima did something revolutionary, all the more strikingly so because it feels so *normal*, almost dry, reading it today: it took an extremely dispassionate view of something from a very unconventional perspective. Information in those days was not shared as readily, nor in as unfiltered (or explicitly filtered) a fashion, as it is today. Many people either had no real, definitive knowledge of what had happened to people in Hiroshima, or only understood it through abstraction. By expressly not preaching or advocating a specific message, by remaining detached from his subjects, Hersey was able to give previously underinformed citizens a very different type of perspective. Moreover, said detachment expanded his reach: people weren't inclined to reject his work out of hand because it *felt* unbiased (or, perhaps more accurately, as unbiased as such an account can be).

I was first assigned this book during the summer between my sophomore and junior years of high school. As you might imagine, I complained that the book was boring, even though I also cringed at its descriptions of the horrors that

arose in the attack's aftermath. (To be fair to my younger self, I think Hersey's relentlessly unvarying tone was what triggered my disconnect, not some inherent senselessness on my part.) Now that I've had the chance to conduct research and spin those findings into works of my own – something I really hadn't had the opportunity to do at the time – I find myself with a greater appreciation for what Hersey accomplished. It really is a tightrope he's walking, a needle he's threading, bringing a hidden story into the light.

Obviously, that's a skill I highly respect, and one I'm deeply interested in cultivating in each of you. I want you to have that sort of observational eye, to see what must be seen (even if it's hidden), and to develop an understanding of how best to share and document those observations. (Since you already know what the giant question at the end of the semester is, you can see exactly *why* I'd want you to hone this skill.)

Fortunately, we don't have any "aftermath sites" for you to study, nor atrocities to witness, nor scarred, broken, traumatized survivors for you to interview. Instead, we have teenagers. *Lots* of teenagers, all striving, foraging, enduring, seeking, struggling, growing, losing, succeeding, and/or finding their way through a very unique, specific world. [Some of you have mentioned that "Arcadia is a bubble." You may also have noticed my particular – some would say peculiar – emphasis on *place* and how it relates to people/larger messages in literature. Now you know why.]

For your first major project in World Literature, I want you to document a world. Specifically, I want you to hold a lens up to the world around you – your school, its communities, its dramas and its concerns, the things that make it go. I want you to observe students and adults, to document what you see, and to coordinate with your groupmates in order to produce a unique, House-specific view of a week during your second semester. By splitting the workload, you can avoid duplication – some people report on, say, dynamics in the drama department as rehearsals ramp up for the spring musical, or at practice for girls' basketball in the wake of their big CIF win, while others observe the freshmen at play, the counselors at work, the rhythms and flows of day-to-day life at a large public high school.

The key, then, becomes this: how do you put it all together? How do you decide to share what you see? How will you craft a narrative from these disparate parts in a way that gives us some sort of understanding of the whole?

That, children of mine, is up to you. Good luck.

Some Considerations for Your Consideration

- Since these aren't going to degenerate into sordid, graphic soap-opera tell-alls of the horrors of Arcadia High School – these are meant to be sharable, school-appropriate pieces, and you're not chronicling the aftermath of an atomic attack – what are you going to choose to include? What's the ultimate thing that you're trying to show, the big ideas, the themes...and how are the things you're including contributing to your attempts? If this is a chronicle of life here, a portal into a world that's really unknown to anyone but yourselves, what's worth seeing that the rest of us are missing?
- What sort of narrative perspective do you intend to include? Are you going to try to keep the "voices" of your reporters consistent, or will different sections be written in individual styles? What's the best perspective for your tales?
- Structure-wise, how will the stories interact? Will they be interwoven, a la Hersey; intermingling, in which one character's interactions with another serve as the jumping-off point from one section to another; or demarcated, in which there exist clear boundaries between the scenes and each scene is brought to its conclusion without interruption? What's the best format for your work?
- Will you be participating in what you're chronicling, or will you avoid interaction, or at least avoid documenting your impact on the proceedings?
- How will you divide the workload, and how wide a swath of campus life are you trying to capture?
- Consider how you wish to bring it to me. Your final draft will be submitted by one member to Turnitin.com (your House's "Hive Queen," to steal from Orson Scott Card), but it'll also be bound and brought to me in hard-copy form. Who illustrates? Will you paint, draw, or photograph things? Which visuals will add a dimension to your story?