

The Necessity of Sorrow

When Paul Fussell admits to the atrocious nature of the atom bomb in his essay, *Thank God for the Atom Bomb*, he appears to weaken the central emotional argument of his piece: that the destruction of Hiroshima is an intricate issue that one must look upon from a perspective which considers both sides. One must especially appraise, Fussell contends, the concept that taking thousands of lives saved many thousands more, and that the dropping of the bomb was for the greater good. Fussell's vivid descriptions, which he warns are "not for the weak-stomached" (33) seem to work against him, creating intense sympathy for the victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that runs counter to the emotional appeal he has thus far produced on behalf of soldiers, men who survived the war because they were not forced to invade Japan. In reality though, Fussell is merely heightening the complexity of his argument, both establishing himself as a compassionate writer and attempting to prove that even upon examination of both sides of the issue, the atom bombing of Japan was a necessary evil. Understanding the intricacy of this argument is also vital to the formation of one's own opinion on whether or not the atom bomb should have been used, and therefore Fussell's rhetoric must be examined with the utmost scrutiny before the reader accepts the presented opinions.

Before Fussell concedes the brutality of the bombings, he takes a fairly one-sided position. Although early in his essay Fussell admits that the bomb was a "most cruel ending to that most cruel war" (14), and that those who claim that the use of the atom bomb was wrong are simply attempting to "resolve ambiguity" (14) concerning the ethics of war, he spends most of his essay expounding his argument for why the bomb was,

without doubt, necessary. Using mainly statistics and accounts of soldiers, Fussell introduces several compelling figures. First, he reveals that for the anticipated Allied invasion of Japan, “one million American casualties was the expected price” (15). Secondly, Fussell tells us that “Universal national kamikaze was the point” (17): in other words, every man, woman, and child in Japan would have been prepared to sacrifice their life in defense of the homeland. If this suicidal loyalty is taken into consideration, it seems that the loss of Japanese life upon the invasion of the mainland would have far outweighed the actual loss of life that occurred when Hiroshima and Nagasaki were destroyed. However, despite the import of these facts and figures, they reveal only one side of an incredibly complex and divisive argument. Therefore, Fussell is, seemingly, playing into the role he had set for those he critiqued: those who, like Bruce Page, he accuses of being “simple-mindedly unimaginative and cruel” (32). By the time Fussell asserts the sorrow of the bombings, he is on the verge of hypocrisy.

Because Fussell is arguing from a perspective that belies his personal opinion on fairness, it is all the more vital that he complicate his position when he does. The insertion of sympathy-raising details concerning the victims of Hiroshima, while acting against Fussell’s prior poignancy on behalf of his comrades-in-arms, cements his position as morally superior to the Bruce Pages of the world: those who view the issue from only one angle. This dominance is made especially clear when Fussell mentions in his passage that “there are two sides” (32) and that unlike Page he is “painfully aware of both at once” (32). Indeed, it is Fussell’s heartrending imagery of “skin hanging down, breasts torn off, people bleeding and burning, dying mother’s nursing dead babies” (33) that informs the reader just how deeply Fussell feels the pain that accompanies mentions of

Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

At this point, Fussell has intentionally confused his topic. All that has become clear, through Fussell's initial statistics and personal accounts and through his subsequent imagery of Hiroshima, is that both dropping the bomb and not dropping the bomb were deeply immoral options. However, in this uncertainty, Fussell proves part of his original point: that if the bombs are considered from both sides of the spectrum, there is no simple answer to whether they should have been dropped or not. Rather, Fussell forces the reader to exercise negative capability, to understand the "ambiguity" (14) of the situation.

Furthermore, the tension that arises as Fussell details his character and establishes sympathy on the part of the victims of Hiroshima brings to his essay an entirely new aspect: the interplay between modern guilt and the necessity of choice. Even as Fussell justifies the decision to drop the bomb, he must acknowledge that he can "purchase no immunity from horror" (32). Fussell's choice of the word "purchase" here implies an inability to escape the contrition accompanying Hiroshima, regardless of what one puts forth, be it money, a cold heart, or a clean conscience. Additionally, his use of the word "immunity" leads the reader to believe that even if Fussell was able to avoid the "horror" of Hiroshima, it would still exist: he does not say destroy or remove. Fussell's phrasing of this statement implies that the modern guilt concerning the bombings of Japan is, in a word, ubiquitous: if it is not understood, the culprit is, according to Fussell, just another Bruce Page.

That being said, Fussell does not end his essay in this position of incertitude; instead, he continues his attempt to prove the atom bomb necessary. However, Fussell now stands at a point of moral high ground. He has considered the horrors of both

perspectives, and, like President Truman before him, been forced to make a decision. When that decision turns out to be that “the bomb seemed precisely the right thing to drop” (32), it carries a weight lent by Fussell’s now seemingly righteous ethical identity. Although Fussell’s emotional appeal appears to have lost momentum, his overall point has been reinforced.

Fussell transitions directly from his graphic depictions of Hiroshima to a similarly graphic description of a soldier having his arm blown off. In doing so, the counterproductive emotionality induced by his recounting of the Hiroshima bombing is, to an extent, offset. While the image of “a stark naked man standing in the rain with his eyeball in his palm” (33) still resonates, the reader is distracted by a similarly callous description of “the bloody mess that was once my left arm” (34). One can infer by Fussell’s placement of this second portrayal of brutality that the insertion of his sentimental words on Hiroshima was deliberate: positioned in order to examine a similarity in the barbarity of classical warfare and the atom bomb. The soldier’s choice of the word “mess” also evokes Fussell’s description of the invasion Japan as a quagmire of bloodshed and terror.

Perhaps most important though is that Fussell has defeated his own hypocrisy on a deeper level. Thus far he has argued on behalf of the necessity of the atom-bomb by claiming that only those that have “experience, sheer, vulgar experience” (14) in the savagery of close combat have any sort of understanding of the calamity avoided by the “vast historical tragedy” (32) that was the atom bombings of Japan. Despite this, Fussell has, at the beginning of his paper, seemingly neglected the fact that according to his logic one cannot understand the brutality of the atom bombings without having been

there first hand. Therefore, Fussell's complication of his own argument becomes increasingly integral. His use of eyewitness accounts and the book *Unforgettable Fire: Pictures Drawn by Atomic Bomb Survivors* is, in essence, as close as any westerner can come to the cataclysm that was Hiroshima without actually having been there. It is, in effect, an artificial form of Fussell's touted experience, one which he has implemented in order to establish himself as reputable to comment from the opposite side of the debate: the side of the victims. Once again, the stress created by Fussell removes the blot of hypocrisy from his essay, justifying his attitude towards the atom bomb.

As Fussell creates emotional tension, he accomplishes several things. He forces his audience to consider both perspectives on the dropping of the atomic bomb. In doing so, he establishes his own persona as a compassionate figure and gives his argument for the dropping of the bomb a moral backing: he has seen the scene in which "a bloody woman holds a bloody child in the ruins of a house" (33), yet he persists in his argument. This, in turn, sheds light on the juxtaposition of modern guilt and the decision-making process, as well opens new ground for comparison: namely, that of a more specific inspection of the similarities between Hiroshima and combat in terms of physical barbarity. Most importantly, however, Fussell applies his principle of experience as a source of authority to both sides of the argument, establishing himself as one of the few who are both qualified to comment on the dropping of the bomb and eloquent enough to do so.

Works Cited

Fussell, Paul. *Thank God for the Atom Bomb*. New York: Summit. Print.