Summary

The atomic bomb had just been dropped on Hiroshima, Japan in 1945, when in 1946 John Hersey published this book telling the true survivor stories of six different human beings who were there in Hiroshima on that fateful day of August 6th. The accounts of Miss Toshinki Sasaki, a twenty year old clerk, Dr. Masakazu Fujii, a physician, Miss Hatsuyo Nakamura, a tailor’s widow, Father Wilhelm Kleinsorge, a German priest, Dr. Terufumi Sasaki, a surgeon, and Reverend Mr. Kiyoshi Tanimoto, a pastor at the Hiroshima Methodist Church. Hiroshima was a city of two hundred and forty five thousand people—one hundred thousand of whom were killed by the dropping of the world’s first atomic bomb by the United States of America. Through these combined memoirs, we see the astonishing destruction done to the city, the bodies of the thousands killed, the frantic efforts of rescue and medical aid, the resulting illness and radiation poisoning, and the lasting physical and emotional effects of this one powerful act. Then we see what came of these six survivors forty years down the road when Hersey returned to Japan and relocated them to complete the story.

Organizational Patterns

*Hiroshima* is divided into five sections: “A Noiseless Flash,” in which we hear the characters memories of the explosion itself; “The Fire,” in which we live through the immediate panic and results of the bomb; “Details are Being Investigated,” in which the recovery continues and predictions and facts are circulating as to what it was that hit Hiroshima, “Panic Grass and Feverfew,” in which we learn about the illness and trauma...
to be dealt with, and then “The Aftermath,” which is Hersey’s account of their lives forty years later that was added in this addition. Appropriate to the content of the book, within these sections the narration switches back and forth between the six characters that we are following. There are marked breaks to indicate when the character is switching.

The Central Question/ Enduring Theme

Morality in War

Should the United States have dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima?

The amazing thing about this account is the fact that the author gives such a vivid depiction of the event without showing a bias or discussing the great question of whether the bomb should have been dropped. The book shows the effects and the mixed reactions of the people of Hiroshima, but never does the author condemn the decision to drop the bomb, nor does he condone it. This is powerful in that the central question that the book poses is not answered, but rather Hersey gets the audience to contemplate the moral issues of this kind of warfare and leaves the answer up to the reader’s judgment.

Issues Related to the Study of Literature

Theme:

Pride in Cultural Identity:

A sense of cultural identity is prevalent throughout the book. First, there are many different references throughout the book to aspects of Japanese culture and tradition, even language (which is always followed by a translation). However, there is also a strong
sense of national identity in each of the characters and a pride in their heritage and country despite the traumatic conditions that it was currently suffering. Those who were not injured felt guilt to see their countrymen suffering and dying for the emperor when they were not, and extreme efforts were taken by the strong to provide whatever relief could be given.

Hatred vs. Forgiveness and Religion:

There were mixed reactions amongst the victims in Hiroshima, something seen in our six characters. There were those who felt a deep and irrevocable anger grow within themselves and a strong hatred for America set in. Meanwhile, there were others who simply saw this as an unavoidable effect of being in war and dealt with the situations they found themselves in as they came. There were many who turned to religion, be it Buddhist, Christian, or another organization, for understanding and peace, while others believed there could not be a god if this sort of pain and destruction was allowed to fall upon them.

Survival Amidst Devastation: The Fall of Civilization:

The book makes us consider our dependency on the system of our society and forces us to think about what would happen if everything was destroyed and we did not have access to the things we take for granted. Hospitals and buildings were destroyed and they did not have near enough medicine (let alone doctors) to treat the thousands of wounded in need. Doctors did not have the time or ability to do their work the way they normally would, and were forced to choose which patients to treat. Also there was the enormous need for rescue, food and water, and friends had little means of providing any of this. Many were searching for missing family members, and all means of communication were unavailable making the spread of news difficult.

Power in Scientific Advancement:

This whole episode took place because of the scientific advancement of learning how to divide two atoms, as the Japanese heard reports of. Clearly with the development of new
scientific discoveries comes a tremendous deal of responsibility and power. This can be power to accomplish great things, and as seen here, power to cause horrific death and destruction. There also come the ethical questions of whether it is ethical to test these new developments on human beings—civilians moreover.

Setting:
The story, of course, takes place in Hiroshima, with references to neighboring cities that survivors fled to after the explosion. It would be extremely beneficial to give students background knowledge, as many may not know much about the city or culture. I would provide a map (similar to the one below) to show them the location and set up of the city.

From seeing a visual, students will be able to envision the breadth of the bomb’s effects, as well as see the location of the various areas and rivers throughout the city which are made reference to in the book. It would also be advisable to give background on the city’s cultural setting: explaining the terms brought up in the book as well as the political and social set up in Japan, particularly the position of the emperor.

Point of View/ Narrative Voice

*Hiroshima* is told in third person, switching between the stories of the six main characters. They are detailed accounts retold by John Hersey in a journalistic style as a
result of his interviews with the survivors. His voice becomes that of a very trustworthy narrator, as he gives a clear and unbiased account. Never does the narration jump into his head, enlightening us to his thoughts or opinions of what he is accounting. He gives us the facts, combined with the feelings and thoughts of these survivors during and after the explosion.

Literary Terms

The following are major literary terms that could easily be taught in the reading of this novel:

Characterization- we are given deep insights into these different characters and learn a lot about who they are by the skill Hersey uses in portraying each of them.

Dialogue- there are many instances of actual dialogue that Hersey inserts into the telling of the story.

Foreshadowing- there is the moment on page 2, at the end of the introductory paragraph before we jump into the story where the author uses an excellent example of foreshadowing of what is about to come: “Now each knows that in the act of survival he lived a dozen lives and saw more death than he ever thought he would see. At the time, none of them knew anything.”

Setting- The fact that there is such a central importance to physical and cultural setting provides the opportunity to discuss the importance of setting and how considering it enhances our appreciation of the novel.

Affective Issues Related to the Work

Students can connect to this work in the sense that it adds to their understanding and knowledge they have of World War II and the dropping of the atomic bomb. It provides an inside look at the history that they study in their history classes.

Also, students are living in an era of continuous ethical questions that arise with new technological and scientific development: abortion, cloning, stem-cell research, and new methods of warfare, are just a few of the modern day morality questions that students are
surrounded with. The questions that *Hiroshima* rise in a reader about morality can be used to examine the continuing questions in the world we live in.

**Vocabulary Issues**

The main foreseeable difficulty that students will encounter in reading this text is the Japanese: the names, phrases and pronunciation. However, whenever a Japanese word is included, the author pauses to define it for the reader, effectively intertwining Japanese language and culture while maintaining a reader-friendly text.

**Background Knowledge**

There is definitely some background knowledge that students should be allowed to build in order to comprehend the reading of the book. First of all, they need to be situated into the context of the event. They need to have basic information about World War Two and the attack on Pearl Harbor and the resulting war between the United States and the Empire of Japan. Then it would be good to go into the progress of the war and the reasoning in the decision to drop the atomic bomb, as well as some history about the development of the atomic bomb and the fear that came with this new atomic warfare. Then it would aid students to be provided with some background knowledge on Japanese culture—particularly the feelings of national pride and the view of the emperor.

**Implications for Students of Diversity**

The interaction and relations between two different cultures and countries is at the center of the novel. This opens up ideas about how we view and think about those who are of a different nationality or cultural group than us. Interesting also to discuss about diversity are the amounts to which people chose to shun or embrace aspects of the other culture. In classes with students of varying diversity, these issues will be very applicable and may relate to experiences of their own. The book also highlights many cases of disability which are brought on from the effects of the bomb—for example, Miss Sasaki who is crushed by the bookcase and deals with a crippled leg for the rest of her life, injuries that twice cause a fiancé to desert her. Questions of how we treat people that are different...
from us are prevalent throughout the novel, and can provide meaningful discussion starts in a class when addressed with sensitivity.

Gender Issues

There are some gender questions that the book raises. A main one is the efforts for the “Hiroshima Maidens,” in which some of the young women with scars from the explosion were taken over the America to receive plastic surgery to restore their appearance. The book addresses how several questioned why this was a program in place exclusively for females. Gender is also a question when Father Kleinsorge convinces Miss Sasaki that if she is not going to be married she ought to go and join a nunnery rather than continuing to live on her own.

Research Issues/ Project Ideas

- Considering how this book is written based off interviews and in a journalistic style, it would be an idea to have students conduct interviews with someone in the community who lived through war and then write their account.
- A major question that I had while reading the book was how the publication of this book was received by Americans just one year after the fateful dropping of the bomb. It would be interesting to have students research its reception and the effect of literature on conscious and social awareness.
- Students could have a debate regarding the decision to drop the atomic bomb, and be required to come prepared with some research on the topic to add to the discussion.
- Students could make a creative representation of their feelings after having read *Hiroshima*.
- Students could write a personal narrative about a time in their lives in which they experienced fear and how they handled the situation.

Enrichment Resources

*Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes* by Eleanor Coerr

*My Hiroshima* by Junko Morimoto
The Atomic Bomb: Voices From Hiroshima by Kyoko Iriye Selden
http://www.herseyhiroshima.com/hiro.php The Publication of Hiroshima in the New Yorker

Who’s Who of Pulitzer Prize Winners by Elizabeth A. Brennan
http://www.hiroshima-remembered.com/ Hiroshima and Nagasaki Remembered

www.dod.state.ga.us/.../guadavankirspeech.html