

World Literature Essay

Analysis of a Short Extract from '*Black Rain*' by Masuji Ibuse

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Ibuse's 'Black Rain' weaves together the stories of several people's experiences following America's deployment of the atomic bomb at Hiroshima. For much of the novel, the story is told through the diaries of these characters, the most important of which is that of Shigematsu, whose niece, Yasuko, hopes to be married once her prospective husband has recognised that she is not suffering from radiation sickness which has affected so many, including Shigematsu himself. There are several themes which run through the novel, as well as images which are referred to again and again, such as the loss of tradition, the Japanese 'never say die' attitude and most obviously the pain and suffering which can be inflicted by this most powerful of weapons. The extract, which is taken from Chapter 9, begins on page 127 with the words 'I tried to sit up in bed' and ends on page 129 with the words 'but what else could one say'. It is from a section of Shigematsu's diary from August 7th, the day after the dropping of the bomb. Many of the important themes and images in the novel are evident in this passage, and it includes both brutal and graphic descriptions of his injury as well as rather unusual image of a piece of sheet music floating down from the sky. This makes it one of the more significant, and certainly one of the more intriguing extracts.

It begins with a description of the pain which Shigematsu is in when he wakes up the day after the blast. This is important, as it is one of the first instances in the novel where Shigematsu describes in detail the 'excruciating pain'¹ which he is in. In previous extracts from his diary, he barely mentions his own discomfort, and the reader assumes that he had hardly noticed since he was in such great shock. Earlier in the novel, he refers to his injuries in an almost detached manner, as if he can not quite believe that it is his face which is peeling away². This extract is very different, as Shigematsu has not only recognised the pain that he is in but describes it in detail, and is aware of the location and nature of the pains he feels, writing that 'the pain was different in quality from usual'.³ He gives a detailed description of how he raises himself from bed, and his perseverance and initiative are impressive. In order to get up, he writes that he had to 'turn my body on its side', then get onto his knees as 'one elbow goes to the bed, while one presses oneself up with the other hand'⁴. He observes that 'sufferers from Lumbago get up in the same way', and that the movement of his arms was similar to the 'position as when someone doing a classical Japanese dance gets up off the floor'⁵ and he wonders to himself if the originator of the Japanese dance had suffered from Lumbago. This use of this type of humour is typical of Shigematsu's diary. It may seem odd, almost tasteless in fact for him to have maintained his sense of humour throughout these events, yet it demonstrates his strength of character, as well as the degree of shock which he is in as he associates what he sees with very bizarre images.

¹ Masuji Ibuse 'Black Rain' p127

² This is demonstrated on page 45, when he only becomes aware of the injury to his face when a woman tells him that he has hurt his face, and even then he writes that 'There was no particular pain'

³ Masuji Ibuse 'Black Rain' p128

⁴ Masuji Ibuse 'Black Rain' p128

⁵ Masuji Ibuse 'Black Rain' p128

The second paragraph of the extract continues with this theme, as Shigematsu describes how he manages to get up onto his feet. Almost every part of his body hurts, and he writes that 'I had jabbing pains in my toes. When I moved, it felt as though I was treading on needles'⁶. These sharp images are particularly evocative, and it is almost painful to read. He is forced to go down on the stairs 'on all four limbs'⁷, bizarrely reverting back to the habits of a young child, demonstrating the sheer intensity of the pains in his belly.

The tone of the second half of the extract is different, and the juxtaposition of the positive images within it and the negative images of pain in the first part of the extract is very effective. He leaves the factory and sees one of those waiting to be picked up by a truck rushes forward shouting 'I saw it! I saw it first'⁸ as he picks up a scrap of paper that has come 'fluttering down from the sky'⁹. This is another interesting image, as one often associates things falling from the sky as heavenly. In the case of Hiroshima, objects falling from the sky have brought immense destruction on the city and pain to its people. But this paper is something different, and represents one of the more sensitive images in the book, as it is a reminder of peaceful times past. What has been picked up is a piece of sheet music which had been 'carried up into the sky, alight, by the blast from the previous day's raid, then roamed the void for a whole day and night before coming to earth again.'¹⁰ This demonstrates the sheer power of the weapon, that the bomb has the capability to blast things into the sky. However, it is also symbolic of the triumph of the Japanese spirit over the power of destructive technology. Whilst on the one hand the bomb had the power to destroy an entire city, it could not destroy a piece of sheet music. The words to the song are important; 'Cherry blossom, cherry blossom, in the spring sky...'¹¹ as these images of spring may be symbolic of better times to come for the Japanese people. On the other hand, the paper remains charred, and many of the Japanese people will suffer from this type of physical scarring for many years to come as a result of the problems posed by radiation sickness. This sign of a thing from the past which has been irreparably damaged could be seen as symbolic of the lasting effects of the atomic bomb on the country and its people. Cherry Blossom is an important symbol for the Japanese people, and the country is home to huge numbers of trees which then shed their blossom. The bomb has meant that it is charred paper, with the words 'cherry blossom' imprinted on it that is falling, rather than the blossom itself. This is an extremely poignant image and one which is again demonstrative of the hard times ahead for the Japanese and the struggles which they will have to face before life continues as before once again.

In the final paragraph of the extract, the last of the refugees are taken away by truck. They leave with a very positive attitude, chorusing 'Best of luck' to the manager as they depart. His response is interesting, and again demonstrative of the Japanese character of resistance in the face of adversity, calling 'Never say die! Keep

⁶ Masuji Ibuse 'Black Rain' p128

⁷ Masuji Ibuse 'Black Rain' p128

⁸ Masuji Ibuse 'Black Rain' p128

⁹ Masuji Ibuse 'Black Rain' p128

¹⁰ Masuji Ibuse 'Black Rain' p129

¹¹ Masuji Ibuse 'Black Rain' p129

smiling!’¹² to them. Throughout the novel, the people try to maintain this attitude, as their survival and positive attempts to get the city back on its feet will help the war effort, something very important for the patriotic Japanese whose attitude of ‘No surrender’ is best demonstrated by their willingness to die for their country as suicide bombers. Shigematsu’s response is also interesting, writing of the managers words; ‘A hollow mockery at such a time perhaps, but what else could one say?’¹³ since up to this point in the novel he has been very patriotic. As the novel progresses, and he sees the extent of the destruction which has been caused by the bomb, he becomes more and more disillusioned by the war, and less convinced of the justifications for the ‘no surrender’ attitude. This is one of the first occasions where he views the events around him with a degree of subjectivity. Up to this point, he has had the role of an observer, and has portrayed the events without commenting himself upon them, or expressing his own views. As he sees the full effects of the bomb war on the city and the people, he becomes progressively less objective, and this slightly negative, or at least questioning comment, is the first sign of this. The questioning tone in this passage is similar to that which is found throughout the novel, and one gets the sense that Shigematsu is absorbing his surroundings, but is not entirely sure what to make of the situation.

This extract is important as it includes many of the main themes of the novel, including physical pain, the attitude of the Japanese and the destruction of traditions and of former ways of life. The use of the image of music floating down from the sky is very symbolic and also a poignant reminder of how life once was. The extract also marks something of a turning point in the novel, as Shigematsu becomes more aware of the extent of the destruction and begins to find it more difficult to maintain a positive attitude.

Words: 1498

Bibliography:

Ibuse, Masuji: *Black Rain*, Kodansha International, London 1979

¹² Masuji Ibuse ‘Black Rain’ p129

¹³ Masuji Ibuse ‘Black Rain’ p129