“A Sound of Hammering”
Dazai Osamu

Brian Thelen
Hinsdale South High School
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Senior English:
Literature of Asia and the Middle East
Time Required: Three Days (50 minutes each)
1. *Summary*

Dazai Osamu’s 1947 short story “A Sound of Hammering” is a quintessentially modern tale depicting the mid-century malaise that arose in many Japanese who bore witness to the violence and depravity that was so characteristic of the epoch. Taking the form of a personal correspondence between a twenty-six year old man and a writer whom he admires, “Hammering” takes readers into the mind of a character who imagines himself to be “at the end of his rope” (195), all but certain that the remainder of his life will not be worth living. So he writes a letter.

“Dear Sir,” the letter begins, “I don’t know what to do” (194). And right from the start, the unnamed protagonist has presented an unnamed writer with an imprecise request, the effect of which is to disorient the reader and establish a melancholic, even hopeless tone.

The impetus for the letter writer’s ambivalent attitude toward the future appears to be his—and, for that matter, all of Japan’s—experiences in the recent past. Dazai sets his narrative shortly after Japan has been ravaged, both at home and abroad, by the horrors of the Second World War. Emperor Hirohito’s unconditional surrender to the Allies on August 15, 1945 is the impetus for the protagonist’s anguish; it is the moment that he “made up [his] mind to die” and the cause of “that faint, distant sound of hammering” that will invade his thoughts as long as he remains alive (195). Anytime he should feel inspired, the protagonist’s optimism is shattered by the oppressive sound of the hammer. Reading great literature, completing an honest day’s work, spending leisure time with friends, even falling in love—nothing has a lasting impact on the protagonist’s desire to live, every pleasantry crushed under the weight of a past to which even nihilism cannot give definition.

Ultimately, the purpose of the protagonist’s letter is to make a final grasp at social integration at the moment of his deepest despair. He sends his letter to the famous author in question, not only because he enjoys this author’s work, but because he fancies himself a writer too. At the beginning of his letter, the protagonist rejoices in small, even coincidental connections between himself and the author: that they attended the same middle school; that they resided with the same family for a time. By the end of the letter, one expects the author to reply in such a powerful way that he will justify all of the protagonist’s praise. He does not. “[I]n haste”, his response offers only religious platitudes and an explicit withholding of sympathy (202). Readers are left to wonder what becomes of the protagonist: whether the end comes violently or in the rhythms of natural time.

2. *Historical/Literary Context*

The understand “A Sound of hammering”, it is necessary for readers to be familiar with two contextual frames: first, the circumstances of Japan’s defeat in World War II (to which the protagonist of the story explicitly refers), and second, Dazai’s inner turmoil, his depression, and his untimely demise.
As part of an attempt to galvanize support for the war effort, Japan saw a rise in nationalism and a corresponding rejection of the Western world. Jazz music was censored from the radio; etymologically Western words were pared from the lexicon; and the notion of a divine Emperor was emphasized (Schirokauer and Clark 317). Hirohito’s unconditional surrender to the Allies, then, would have been viewed by many Japanese as, not only a necessary capitulation to a more formidable military, but also as blindness to the sacrifices many Japanese made during the war, as the evisceration of a cultural heritage, as a betrayal.

Of course, the horrific results of the war, particularly domestically, should not be overlooked, as the depravity must certainly have colored Dezai’s views on life. During the war’s final months, most of Japan’s major industrial, commercial, and residential centers were reduced to rubble by Allied bombs. By the time the infamous attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were planned, these two cities had become relatively obvious targets, owing to the fact that they were two of the few high-value targets that remained. To make matters worse, the Soviet Union turned its attention toward Japan, attacking from the north. Despite the objections of many of his military advisors, Hirohito made known his opposition to the continuation of the war; he understood that his viability as an emperor would be compromised in the event of a complete rout of his nation (Schirokauer and Clark 318-20).

Emperor Hirohito’s surrender can be understood as a fulcrum point for the protagonist of “Hammering”, for the writer Dazai Osamu, and for the Japanese people writ large. Schirokauer and Clark conclude their chapter on World War Two by quoting Oe Kenzaburo, as he recalls the event:

> The adults sat around their radios and cried. The children gathered outside in the dusty road and whispered their bewilderment. We were most confused and disappointed by the fact that the Emperor had spoken in a human voice, no different from any adult’s. None of us understood what he was saying, but we had all heard his voice. One of my friends could even imitate it cleverly. Laughing, we surrounded him—a twelve-year-old in grimy shorts who spoke with the Emperor’s voice. A minute later we felt afraid. We looked at one another; no one spoke. How could we believe that an august presence of such awful power had become an ordinary human voice on a designated summer day. (320)

In some respects, Oe’s childhood disillusionment is its own sound of hammering, crushing his hope in the ethereal might of his leader and his nation.

Dazai Osamu’s (born Tshushima Shuji) biography suggests that he used personal experience to guide his writing. It is well-documented that, similar to the protagonist of “Hammering”, Dazai experienced emotional emptiness so severe that it, in a sense, occluded even nihilism (200). “Alcoholism, drug addiction, affairs with geishas, suicide attempts alone or with another, and frequent psychological traumas of various sorts were situations integral to Dazai’s existence” (Contemporary Authors). In his fifth attempt at suicide, Dazai finally succeed, drowning himself on the day he would turn thirty-nine.
3. Discussion Questions

Section A—Plot Questions
i. An aspiring artist himself, the protagonist is studied in the humanities and
notes a few writers and painters that he did or still does respect. Identify
these artists.
   - Gogol, Pushkin, the French Impressionist painters (Cezanne,
     Monet, Gaugin), Ogata Korin, and Ogata Kenzan

ii. What is the protagonist’s opinion of national politics?
   - The longer he lives, the less important it seems, and the more
     muddied are the waters of each party’s platform. By the end of the
     text, he imagines both the Liberal and the Progressive Parties to be
     “made up of the same old faces” and the Communist Party a
     parasitic group of “maggots breeding upon the corpse of a nation”
     (200).

iii. The protagonist sends a letter to the author because he has been unable to
     find the answers he seeks through any other avenue. For example, he asks
     his uncle, albeit jokingly, about the meaning of life. What is the uncle’s
     reply?
   - He says “it’s sex and greed that make the world go ‘round” (201).

iv. Is the uncle’s response a satisfying one, in the context of the story?
   - No, as the protagonist had experienced feelings for a woman that
     had failed to slake his thirst for a meaningful connection to the
     world. And he had contemplated becoming a criminal, making
     deals in the black-market; however, even thoughts of great riches
     are not immune to the destructive effects of the sound of
     hammering.

Section B—Discussion Questions
i. From what point-of-view is the story told?
   - At most points of the story, the conventional response to this
     question would be “first-person”; however, Dazai uses multiple
     layers of first-person narration, causing readers to make
     assessments of the reliability of each of the three: (1) the writer of
     the letter, or the protagonist, as I have been calling him; (2) the
     addressee of the letter, or the author, as I have been calling him;
     (3) and finally, there is an omniscient narrator, who briefly appears
     to make the transition between the voices of the first two.

ii. How does the sound of hammering make the protagonist feel?
   - More than anything else, he feels the oppressive heat of apathy.
     This is most clear when Dazai writes that “The sound of the
     banging hammer […] shatters even nihilism” (200). This suggests
     that even a philosophical doctrine of perpetual futility is untenable.
     Apathy trumps nihilism because, at the very least, the nihilist is an
     adherent to some organizational framework, something that
     integrates him into the world of men. Dazai’s protagonist is unable
     to muster-up even enough hope to believe in nothing. One is
reminded of Chinese writer Gao Xingjian’s essay “Without Isms” in which he rejects what he characterizes as an originally Western (but now globalized) tendency to affix labels that “enable the formulation of policies, directions, guidelines, principles, patterns and models, […] right or wrong, mainstream or non-mainstream” (65). The difference is that Gao, in becoming a writer, a creator of ideas, feels like this freedom is empowering rather than damning in its isolation.

iii. Why the sound of hammering?
   - While Dazai had many choices from which to create a grating, cacophonous, oppressive aural environment, the sound of the hammer, in particular, is significant for its connotations of industry and because it elicits a paradoxical relationship between construction and destruction. One hallmark of the Second World War was its intimate connection to industrialization. Not only was industrialization a spur to imperial conquest (in the West and in Japan) but it was also a key enabler in the level of destruction that could be carried out by both sides. Thus the hammer is an effective symbol of war’s violence and a symbol of the rebuilding effort that must follow (and, in occupied Japan, its destroyers literally became its restorers; see Schirokauer and Clark pages 329-35 for a thorough explanation). Ironically, however, this paradox vests itself, inversely, in the protagonist’s psyche. That is to say that any hope he may have had was created in the pre-war times of peace. And while the rest of the world resolved itself to rebuild following the war, the protagonist was resigned to the fact that his psychological destruction was permanent, even perpetual.

iv. Does the protagonist get the answer he is looking for?
   - Yes, no, and maybe.
     i. Yes: The author offers him a solution with a splash of water to the face. The solution? Renew your faith in God. And get over yourself.
     ii. No: Dazai is clear to characterize the author as uneducated and unprincipled (202). Bathed in this light, his advice to “accept [the] words of Jesus” sound like a empty platitude. From this perspective, it could be concluded that Dazai views religion and proverbs as insufficient cures for the ills of this world.
     iii. Maybe: In a sense, the protagonist can be seen as looking for no answer at all, and in a sense, this is what he gets. One might argue that the protagonist does not want a solution; rather, he harbors a bizarre hope that the author will reinforce his own belief in nothing by proving that there is nothing in which to believe. This is the more convenient position.
Section C—The Story in Context

1. The date August 15, 1945 is featured prominently in the text. Why?
   - This is the date on which the surrender of the Emperor, as agreed upon at Potsdam, occurred. At this point, “urban” Japan was almost an anachronism. As Schirokauer and Clark note: “About 40 percent of Japan’s total urban area was wiped out, including 65 percent of residential housing in Tokyo, 57 percent in Osaka, and 89 percent in Nagoya, Japan’s third largest city. At the time of the surrender there were 9 million homeless. Hunger, despair, psychic shock, and fear pervaded the country” (329). These same feelings take root in the mind of Dazai’s protagonist and are the impetus for the sound of hammering.

2. Why does the protagonist begin the think of great writers such as Pushkin and Gogol as “dull and uninteresting as [...] toothbrushes” and grow more attracted to the work of the Genroku Era painters?
   - Dazai appears to be making a commentary on the inability of Continental artifice to pacify the protagonist’s sense of doom. Furthermore, by elevating the work of the Japanese painters (particularly artists who produced work prior to the Meiji Restoration and the attendant Western infiltration of Japan) above more well-known artists such as Gogol or Monet, Dazai celebrates the cultural heritage of the Japanese and suggests that the Modernization and Westernization of his country has eroded the self-respect of its people in favor of a more popular, though no less beautiful, aesthetic.

3. To what extent does “A Sound of Hammering” provide a window into Dazai’s post-war political views?
   - Allowing that Dazai is not, himself, beyond even nihilism, one may assume that he views existing political structures as ineffective. Political action is denuded by hypocrisy and the politician’s pursuit of power at the expense of others. The protagonist, for example, offers that “a man who might have been rejected over and over by a courtesan would go about advocating with a vengeance the abolition of prostitution. In a towering rage, he might beat up a luckier handsome comrade. Then [...] he might receive a medal from the government” (199). In short, government rewards hypocrisy because it is, by nature, hypocritical.

4. Activities

1. (Day 1) Pre-reading activity (20 minutes)
   - Ask students how a person comes to understand his/her life. Where do people get answers to life’s most difficult questions?
(Responses might include: reason, science, family, friends, teachers, art, philosophy, religion, superstition.)

- Discuss whether or not it would seem like a valid approach to write to one’s favorite author (substitute director, screenwriter, television producer, videogame designer, etc.) for this sort of advice.

2. (Day 1) Pre-reading activity II (20 minutes)

- Source found at: [http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3c11645](http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3c11645)
- Examine the photograph of Japanese Emperor Hirohito standing beside American General Douglas MacArthur. This photo was taken at the United States Embassy in Tokyo shortly after the unconditional surrender (for now, withhold this information). What do you notice about the photograph? Consider:
  i. What information is being transmitted in each man’s body language?
  ii. How is each man dressed in this photograph? In what other context(s) might you expect to see these types of clothes?
  iii. Examine their proximity to one another? How do these two figures relate to one another in the given space of the room?
- Have students (if they have not seen this image before) write a brief, fictional conversation that might have occurred between these two men before and after this photo was snapped.

3. (Day 1) Pre-reading activity III (10 minutes)

- Briefly lecture students about the historical events of the mid-1940s and about Dazai’s inner turmoil.
- Students will read the story overnight.

4. (Day 2) Group Activity on Cause and Effect (30 minutes)

- Dazai’s story centers on the traumatic, though chimerical “sound of hammering” experienced by the protagonist. In this exercise, students will inquire after the cause of this tormenting sound. In groups of three or four, students will review the story, writing down (and correctly citing) the circumstances that cause the narrator to hear a sound of hammering.
- Once a list has been made, groups should use it to look for similarities in the causes of this sound.
- Ask each group to write its conclusion on the board.
5. (Day 2) Distribute Q.A.R. handout (attached), and ask students to read about this strategy and use it to prepare questions for the following day’s discussion.

6. (Day 3) Class Discussion (50 minutes)
   - Discuss questions generated by students in their Q.A.R homework activity and use selected questions from Section 3 of this document to help students understand the central purpose of the story.

5. **Citations**


6. **Appendix**

   See following pages (2) for Q.A.R. handout.
Understanding Question-Answer Relationships (QAR)

There are five general types of questions: 1) right there; 2) think and search; 3) between the lines; 4) author and you; and 5) on my own. Refer to the sheet called "Question Answer Relationships" for more information.

**Right There Questions**
Criteria: The answer can be found in the text, can be easy to find, and is important. (Do not ask trivial questions!) Normally the words in the question and the words in the answer can be found in the same sentence in the reading selection. These questions usually result in one-word or short-phrase responses, and there is usually only one right answer.
This type of question may begin with: who is, where is, what is, when is, how many, when did, name, what kind of.

**Think and Search Questions**
Criteria: The answer can be found in the text, but the words in the question and the words in the answer are NOT from the same sentence in the reading selection. To answer this type of question, you need to look over several parts of the reading selection.
This type of question may begin with: summarize, what caused, contrast, retell, how did, explain, find two examples, for what reason, or compare.

**Between the Lines Questions**
Criteria: The answer can NOT be found in the text, but can be figured out based on what you have read. You can base your answer on lines from the story and knowledge that you have from other sources.
This type of question may begin with: why does the character do . . ., how does the character feel about . . .

**Author and You Questions**
Criteria: The answer can NOT be found in the reading selection. You need to connect what you know about the world with what the author has written to answer this type of question. This type of question could explain the theme of the story or how the authors feel about specific topics.
This type of question may begin with: what is the author saying about . . ., how does the author feel about . . .

**On My Own Questions**
Criteria: The answer can NOT be found in the reading selection, and you do not have to have read the story to figure out the answer. However, the question and answer are related to the reading selection in some way, usually in the form of personal opinion or previous knowledge about a subject.
This type of question may begin with: how do you feel about, recall when a time when you, how would you, what would you do, what do you know about.
Understanding Question-Answer Relationships (QAR) in "A Sound of Hammering?"

Right There Questions

Think and Search Questions

Author and You Questions

On My Own Questions