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<Sample Essay>

Hajime Isayama's Call to Arms

*Attack on Titan* is an anime series directed by Tetsurō Araki and written by Yasuko Kobayashi that is based off of the manga series of the same name, created by Hajime Isayama. Isayama's ongoing manga series began on September 9, 2009 and spawned Araki's anime series that ran from April 6, 2013 to September 28, 2013 (Wikipedia). In this work, I will focus on details provided only by the anime series. The series pilot begins with a town of frightened people looking up at a giant looming over a great wall staring back at them in return. A narrator captions this chilling scene, "Humanity was suddenly reminded that day... of the terror of being at their mercy... of the humiliation of being trapped inside a cage." In what follows, I intend to explore the history of Japan as a nation to see how it affected the conceptualization of *Attack on Titan*, and to unfold the racialization present in the series as a propaganda medium for the Japanese.

Following several losses to the Japanese in the first Sino-Japanese War and the establishment of the Republic of China (ROC) in 1912, China's nationalism continued to rise at the start of the 20th century. In July of 1937, fighting between the Japanese and the Chinese began again in Wanping, China when a small battle erupted into what became the second Sino-Japanese War. Mutual hatred and fighting continued up until it was heightened by the Japanese invasion of Malaya in December 1941, which was consequentially the night before the bombing

of Pearl Harbor; the event that spurred the inclusion of Japan in World War II. Japan finally surrendered from war in 1945 (Leong 293-294). With this surrender, Japan enacted a new Constitution on November 3, 1946 that targeted the establishment of democracy and pacifism in Japan. Most important to exploring my thesis, Section 2 of Article 9 makes land, sea and air forces step down. While these forces can protect Japan, they cannot seek out aggression outside of their home (Yamada 197).

Surprisingly enough, the completely destroyed post-war Japan evolved very impressively. The country's GNP per capita rose from \$1,230 in 1950 to \$23,970 in 1990 (US currency). Its average life expectancy made a drastic increase as well, rising from 50 years in 1950 to 75 years in 1990 for men, and from 54 years to 81 years for women. In 1992, Japan was one of the richest countries in the world as well as the United States' archnemesis in competing for the title of the world's leading economy. This wealth is largely attributed to Japan's export industry, which remains today as Japan's prominent income source (Siddiqui 2). Suddenly things took a turn for the worse. Unfortunately for this reclaimed superpower, large bank loans ended Japan's stock market boom, and a decade of very bad stagnation hit Japan's economy and continued into the turn of the century (IMF).

Another reason for the fall of Japan's economy was the increase in oversea competition. East Asian countries like China came up with competitive prices that were very attractive in the export market. Luckily, Japan's advanced technology was demanded from these neighbors in the early 2000s (Siddiqui 4). For example, China was becoming rapidly industrialized at this time so they became frequent consumers of the Japanese. Years later, in 2008, the global recession hit Japan hard. This is a country that relies on its export and technology industries, and the demand for products from these Japanese markets instantly decreased (The Economist). Japan's economy

discovered its lowest point of all time, and remains struggling today to come across a solution. Meanwhile, China has jumped ahead of Japan as the United States' top competitor for the world's leading economy, showing absolutely no sympathy for its neighbor.

A new Japanese Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, took office in late December of 2012. Not only is he promoting monetary stimulus with the lobbying of Japan's central bank to increase inflation in hopes to return economic growth, but he has also recently lifted the ban on overseas fighting in Japan on July 1, 2014 (New York Times). Abe stressed that the restriction of overseas forces in Article 9 made Japan very susceptible to any attacks by nuclear weapon-armed North Korea or a bellicose China that has been known to start territorial disputes; this overturn was framed as being for protection (McCurry). Abe wants to return to what was once a powerful Japan. Unfortunately it is hard for visions of the World War II Japan to stay out of the neighboring Asian countries' minds with his overturning. China especially has become angered by this movement, and many Japanese are terrified that Abe is threatening the peace of their nation.

About four years before this overturn, fans of *Attack on Titan* started to pick up on some racist ideas that are well-hidden within their beloved series. It all began in 2010, when a blog post made by Isayama admitted that his character, Dot Pixis (a military officer), was based entirely off of Imperial Japanese Army general Yoshifuru Akiyama; same bald head, mustache, profession, and numerous other similarities. (Ashcraft). Ashcraft's article went on to add many fans' reactions to Isayama's blog post, and the general feedback was very negative for fans in the Koreas and China. This makes sense, considering Akiyama was a military general (in the late 30s) that belonged to a country responsible for the killing of many innocent people who share their same background. Many fans all across the world have been stumped as to whether they

should accuse Isayama of being racist or just nationalistic, while others have taken it to somewhat of an extreme: death threats.

For fans of the anime in China, threats are considerably understandable. When an outraged fan dives deeper into research on Akiyama, they will likely find out that he began work as an inspector general of military training for Imperial Japan in 1920, and became a principal at a middle school where he taught shooting lessons to Japanese children (HRDÃ). His belligerent acts are very reminiscent of any imperial Japanese general, such as the acts of those generals involved in the very serious moment of Sino-Japanese history coined the “Rape of Nanking”. Although Akiyama was not involved firsthand, his job description alone reminds Chinese people who were involved, as well as all sorts of people of many different backgrounds today of the horror of the hundreds of Japanese soldiers who followed their generals in the demonstrating of barbaric acts toward the Chinese in Nanking in the late thirties. These acts included the rapes of estimated twenty to eighty-thousand women. The demonic Japanese would force Chinese families to engage in incestuous acts that were immediately followed by the onslaught of each family member; many watched their loved ones die an extremely graphic and cruel death right before their eyes (Chang 4-6). “Even the Nazis in the city were horrified, one proclaiming the massacre to be the work ‘bestial machinery’” (Chang 6).

The arguing over the aesthetics of one character within *Attack on Titan* provide adequate proof that even after almost an entire century, Japan and China remain completely hostile toward each other. Japan never apologized specifically for the events at Nanking, and the government has not compensated China for their wartime crimes, either (Chang 222). In February 2014, the most recent Pew Research poll, which is strictly nonpartisan, provided results that were not surprising. Only 6% of China who participated in the poll had a positive view of Japan. Only 5%

of Japan who participated in the poll had a positive view of China (Bremmer). Iris Chang, the author of *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II*, was raised by parents who experienced the pain of being Chinese at the time of the Nanking Massacre. Chang wrote, “they never forgot the horrors of the Sino-Japanese war, nor did they want me to forget. They particularly did not want me to forget the Rape of Nanking” (Chang 7). According to the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, approximately 260,000 people died in the Nanking Massacre alone (Chang 102). Many Chinese families continue to be affected by this catastrophe along with any others during the Sino-Japanese War(s).

For Isayama to go out and openly state that a character he created is entirely based off of an imperial Japanese general is severely problematic. It has encouraged my thesis on this paper alone and the idea that his anime is symbolic of what can come of Japan if they do not return to their powerful roots. The tensions between China and Japan are at an all time high according to Ian Bremmer, and current Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is preparing to protect his country from an attack by the Chinese superpower.

The pilot episode of the *Attack on Titan* anime begins in the very relaxed, isolated Shiganshina District. Shiganshina is surrounded completely by a 50 meter-tall wall, as are the two other districts that are introduced later in the anime. I would like to theorize that these districts, when combined, represent Isayama’s view of Japan. Like the districts, Japan isolates itself from neighboring Asian countries. Of course this is done by the physical reality of the Pacific Ocean surrounding the island, as do the walls of their given districts; however, there is more to this allegory. Japan has always been an extremely nationalistic nation. The pre-World War II Japan had a master-race mentality of which established its reasoning behind ruling out its

neighbors (Chang 3-4). And to this day, Japan does not favor its neighbors. However, this is a view of what Japan can become in the future.

What sets Japan and the districts apart from the outside world is the threat of power. In *Attack on Titan*, this power is the titan race. The titan race is completely fictional, symbolic social commentary on Japan's relations with its enemies. The titans have killed nearly every human being; they are the apocalypse within *Attack on Titan*. Within anime, apocalyptic imagery and themes usually appear at times of social change in Japan (Napier 250). The titans are the Chinese, and the humans they feed on are the Japanese. The majority of the titans (I do not wish to dive into the classifications of titans for the sake of my argument) even portray Chinese aesthetics. Their skin is very pale and often rosy at the cheeks, and they have almond shaped eyes. They look like Chinese depictions of emperors painted in historical portraits; however, they look very evil with eerie grins that stretch all the way across their faces.

Until the titan attack in the pilot episode, there had not been a single titan attack in over a century. However, humanity was almost completely eradicated due to the titans a century prior. The only survivors are those living in each of the three districts: a single Caucasian race of which it is inferred through the various German names, medieval European-style architecture, and theme song of the anime that the fictional districts bear most of their resemblance to Germany. This is very strange, because the future of Japan seems to resemble a feudal-esque setting with little industrialization. With this, it is as if Isayama is saying the future of Japan will fall further and further from being the technologically advanced economical superpower they once were; if they do not change their ways. Although the people within the wall are defined as being surrogates for the current Japanese people of today, there is one native Japanese character within

the anime, called Mikasa, who I believe represents everything the Japanese people used to be prior to their demise in war and economy.

Mikasa is the female protagonist in *Attack on Titan*. In the sixth episode, the audience learns that Mikasa's mom was "an oriental" while her dad was of the same race as the rest of the humans in the anime. She is never shown to be too scared or too upset, and is always proves herself as very skilled, like a model fighter. In the fourth episode of the anime Mikasa is described as "completely proficient in every area", and one character added, "it is apt to say she is an unmatched, unprecedented genius." The bulk of her confidence and strength can be traced back to a flashback scene from the sixth episode of the anime. Mikasa watches both of her parents die, and is kidnapped. She is later saved by a boy named Eren who kills a few of her kidnapers, putting himself in a situation where he will die if Mikasa does not kill the man strangling him. Eren says, "Fight... or die...! Win... and live! The only way to win... is to fight!" Mikasa grows up while always remembering Eren's words. This advice encapsulates the entire series as a whole. It is Isayama's call to arms.

The idea that the only way for the districts to survive is to fight is extremely symbolic. Isayama designed an entire apocalyptic world that could be reversed if humans fought the titans. Those who rise up to the challenge must possess a great deal of patriotism, similar to the patriotism that existed in imperial Japan. A man who showed a disgust of the modern Japan similar to that of Isayama's was Yukio Mishima. Mishima, called "the most important Japanese novelist of the 20th century", ended his career of novels, films, and Nobel Prize nominations with suicide in 1970. This man was very fond of the patriotism of imperial Japan, and hated the Japan he lived in. Mishima recognized that there was little patriotism in Japan, and used his fame to let Japan know how he felt about it. After failing to revive a samurai military by the creation

of his very own in 1970, he committed *seppuku*. “Seppuku” was a ritual form of suicide in which a samurai would cut through his bowels with his sword. Mishima’s seppuku, along with his shouting, “Long live the emperor”, prior to his death, will be remembered by the Japanese for the end of time (Kirjatso).

Yukio Mishima was a man who would rather give up his own life to live in a defeated Japan; a Japan that settled for the “ok” and not the best. He is the same as the male protagonist of *Attack on Titan*, Eren. In the pilot episode, Eren tells his parents that he wishes to join the Survey Corps to fight the titans and end the isolation of the Shiganshina District. His mother is completely against the idea, while his father urges him to follow his curiosity. Later in the episode, Eren watches a titan pick up his mother and completely devour her. He vows to kill every last titan. Although he is full of confidence, he is proven to be a weak Survey Corps member; however, he offers his entire body to the fight. Another character within the Survey Corps, Armin, says in the sixth episode, “The strong prey on the weak. It is such a simple, straightforward world.” He is the voice of those who do nothing about change. Eren is the voice of Isayama’s propaganda. There is quite a large difference between the two. Just as Leo Ching wrote, there is a large difference between equality and fraternity (Ching 4). Isayama is sick of Japan’s status. He wants to rise up and break down the walls of the Shiganshina District; he wants to advance past the Pacific. Isayama wants Japan to become radiant like it once was.

My theory suggests that *Attack on Titan* is a propaganda for uprising. It encourages the Japanese youth to rise against the relaxed norm of modern Japan and to fight for better lives. Hajime Isayama lived through Japan’s economical recession in the turn of the 21st century. He grew up hearing about imperial Japan and its strength. He believes in patriotism; that his country can return to its greatness. Isayama has Mikasa say something in the sixth episode of the anime



that summarizes the connection between Isayama's view of Japan within and without of the series. "We live in a cruel world. A cruel world in which only the victors are allowed to live..." Eren and Mikasa fight so the titans are not the victors, and so should Japan fight so its neighbors are not the victors. It is true that the strong prey on the weak, but there is no reason as to why the weak cannot become the strong.

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