

# The assault - views about past and present

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I. B. English 11 21, March 2011 World Literature Paper 2 — draft In his novel The Assault, Harry Mulisch illustrates a clear example at how human memory can aid us in pursuing a better future ahead of us. As Anton watched the motor boats on the first page of the novel he was amazed at how fast the motor boats moved and the wake they left behind. Each time he saw them zoom by he would try to follow their wake however its pattern became so distorted he could not follow it. Along side the motor boats were the gondolas where they were propelled by the captain pushing a stick back thus moving his boat forward. He then takes this approach on life and lives while constantly bringing up his past. Every time he attempted to look at what the future held in store for him he was sent back towards looking at the past. By looking back and searching for his past he was able to progress into the future without feeling the unbearable light of the future. Mulisch uses an extensive amount of light and dark metaphors, and structure in order to show us that if we desire to progress through a less painful life we should reflect upon our past before we look too far ahead into the future. Mulisch structured his novel in such a way that the reader can unmistakably understand the past from the present. In the very beginning of the book Anton and his family are going about their lives however there is not a single trace of light. Mulisch makes this point very clear for everyone is turning out there lights in case of a bombing run. In addition he writes that all was dark as the murder was committed and peter took the carbon lamp. These had all happened in the past and therefore Mulisch is stating the past is dark. As the reader reaches the end of the book and the final scene is of Anton walking away in the middle of the day, when the sun is the highest, we conclude that

the present is light. This juxtaposition is further backed by the chapter structure Mulisch chose to use. Although many if not all books, rise in chapter number such as this one, Mulisch chose to use years and dates for chapters to very clearly indicating the movement from past to present. This structure and juxtaposition as well as the metaphor of light and dark as representing future and past allows the reader to follow Anton's progression through out. As one scans the novel a noticeable pattern forms in that as the episodes (chapters) progress, so does Anton's knowledge of his past. This is done through Mulisch structuring the novel so that Anton meets a new person and gains a new piece of his past as time goes on. His past first comes back to him when he travels back to Haarlem after living with his Aunt and Uncle in Amsterdam since the murder of Fake Ploeg was committed. Here he is greeted with multiple objects that remind him of his past and one of which is the herring bone pattern on the quay. Mulisch writes, " With sudden excitement he recognized the herringbone pattern of the brick pavement. He had never noticed it in the old days, but now he saw it realized it had always been there. " (Mulisch page 62) The herringbone patter represents how much distortion Anton's memory has about the night the murder was committed. It is this confusion that Anton is excited by and he then strives to find answers through out his life both consciously and unconsciously. In addition to the herringbone pattern on page 62 he also meets Mrs. Beumer and Mr. Beumer. Anton does not like the presence of them when he first meets them but it is because of their connection to his past that leads him to another connection; The monument on the quay. From hear Anton feels like he has an unbearably empty hole inside of him. When

something is empty, in an existentialistic view such as Mulisch, it must be filled and for Anton that something is knowledge of his past. The Episode concludes with Anton thinking of himself floating at the center of the earth. There he would " be able to reflect upon the state of things in eternity. " (Mulisch page 76) Mulisch Has Anton percolating this idea in order to show the reader that Anton is clearly going to reflect upon his past. Shortly after Anton's acquaintance with Haarlem and the Beumers he walks into Fake Ploeg Jr. in Anton's flat. Here they are both greeted with past and they have quite the talk about it. While this is going on Anton is attempting to light a stove filled with dark oil. As the conversation between Anton and Ploeg Jr. escalates the dark oil has yet to light up. At the most enraged part of the conversation Fake decided to throw a stone and after this, a cloud of dark soot from the stove and covered Anton's flat. Ploeg Jr. was a connection to Anton's past and the dark soot covering Anton's flat is representative of a piece of his past he just acquired through Ploeg Jr. This was not an easy feat for Anton was trying to speed up the process while talking to Ploeg Jr. as represented by having too much oil on the stove and trying to light it. This is all occurring while Anton has a headache which plunge him into darkness because of the pain. This then indicates that the past does in fact aid Anton in the way that he lives less painfully. This motif of dimming light (future and pain) with darkness (past and relief) comes up another time while lying on the beach on page 126. Mulisch uses the metaphor of a book for the intended purpose of illustrating the light and dark motifs as Anton was blinded by the whiteness of the pages reflecting the sun onto him. Later in the same scene Anton falls asleep in the light of the beach and awakens to

another of his splitting migraines. A few lines down however Mulisch writes that " in the soothing shade, it had almost disappeared. " Giving way to the motif mentioned earlier. Among the actions that take place in the beginning of the novel, Anton meets a woman whom he meets in a jail cell. It is only when Anton is taken out of the cell and sees blood that his curiosity raises even more. This along with the assault itself fades away into Anton's memory like the wake of the motor boats. As he grows older he begins to think about this woman even more. This is particularly set on by a man named Cor Takes who talks to him about his girlfriend. With this new found information Anton keeps attempting to put a face on the woman in the cell for he thinks it is the woman Takes was talking about (Truus Coster). Anton keeps looking forward to who the woman in the cell was and during this time period, episode three to the final episode, he has constant migraines which plunge him into darkness in order to stop the pain. Mulisch structured this episode as this to show the reader that looking towards the future is dangerous and we should rely on our past before we make assumptions. Mulisch then has Anton stop thinking about Truus for he concurs that she must look like Saskia. Anton accepts this conclusion and his migraines start diminishing. This further extends the conceit of dark and light as ways of representing past and future, good and bad. At the end of the final episode Anton has now spent 36 years searching for his past and finally he comes to a conclusion when he meets his old neighbor Karin Korteweg. Anton finally hears the whole story about his past and he is unusually at ease with this information. Mulisch used this to state that Anton had finally been vindicated of his past. The book ends in mid day, commonly known as when the sun is

at its brightest point. Mulisch uses this structure and juxtaposition of the begging of the book to extend the light and darkness motifs in the novel. Although we can walk through our lives looking towards the future it is much harder than if we walk facing the past. When we look to the future we feel as if our past is always weighing us down such as the panoptic-con of the Nazis during WWII. When we do feel its weight we tend to have a harder time progressing through what each one of us consider our meaningful life. We should always reflect upon our past no matter how much we want to ignore it because by doing so we make better sense of our future and are ultimately brought into the light with no pain. After all " Everything comes to light. "

(Mulisch page 128) Works cited: Mulisch, Harry. The Assault. United States of America: Random House, Inc., 1986. Print.