

# Assault written assessment



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Priyanka Thirumurti Mrs. Harris Language A HL 1 – Written Assessment

2/25/13 Question: How is the incident on page five a metaphor for Anton's quest throughout the novel? In the prologue of the Assault, Harry Mulisch broadly foreshadows the entirety of the novel through an underlying, quintessential theme that provides great insight into human nature.

The image of the solitary man depicted in the opening scene reveals the generalized theme of an unchanging continuity between the past, present, and future that in the protagonist's case, can only be broken by the will and/or desire to endure pain by dealing with and forgetting the past; an ordeal that serves as a comparison to Anton's quest of self discovery throughout the novel. Tying this universal theme with the characterization of Anton, Mulisch portrays how the protagonist's identity is significantly based on his[Anton]childhoodexperiences, which reveals his[Anton] curious and innocent nature.

Anton's innocence is revealed through his thought process: " Anton used to think that Carefree meant a place where cares entered freely, not a place free from cares"(3). Only a child would note nuances in words to give them more meaning. Anton's inclination to make literal, child-like observations about his surroundings factors his approaches to situations in his later life, including his outward display of defiance to accept his own mistakes when confronted with the truth. In addition, in the aftermath of World War II Anton speculates on retrieving a capsule replete with knowledge: " Inside the capsule. . be of interest long before then? "(11)Anton's curiosity reflects his potential because of his thirst for knowledge. The protagonist's thirst for knowledge and child-like naivety remain with him, setting the stage for

hardships and adversity in his future. For example, after the heart wrenching incident in which Anton is separated from his parents, his child-like curiosity leads him to discover his own weakness; “ It was much more painful. . . wrists crossed under his chin”(28).

Unable to defend his family, Anton puts much blame on his inability to take care of his family without fully realizing his duty as a child. As Anton grows he encounters many more hardships that he is unable to handle without fully realizing his duty as a child and with the maturity his age implies. For instance, when Mrs. Beumer invites him his attention drifts to his surroundings and he avoids many of the questions through a tangential thought process that is his undoing. Making his life much more difficult than it should be, Anton shares a likeness with the man on the barge in the prologue of the novel.

Similar to the way the man “ planted the stick sideways in the bottom of the canal, grasped it firmly, and walked backwards”(5) Anton uses an equally difficult means of handling situations--- deliberate evasion. By taking the path less traveled by, Anton finds himself living in stasis though recurring episodes of past memories that hinder his psychological development. The death of his brother, Peter Steenwijk, and that of his father and mother caused him great suffering as he made transitions from childhood to adolescence and finally to adulthood.

When Anton returns to Harlem, his home and the general setting remind him of the painful past, which he leaves behind without any semblance of peace, but only of disturbance and uncertainty:“ Care, care...It was wartime, one big disaster, my family was murdered, and I stayed alive”(117). His perceived

ignorance reflects on his complex characterization. The actual events diminish in impact, but they still remain in his memory and affect him to such an extent that he decides to become an anesthesiologist, an irony in and of itself.

This pattern of stasis can be directly related to the motion of the man on the barge because he stays in the same place as barge moves through the water as Anton's development remains stagnant although he changes physically. Similar to the stage of denial portrayed by the Kubler Ross theory, Anton lives in denial, exemplifying the "action" of staying in one place and not moving forward, without directly showing or accepting, even to himself, any signs of stagnant behavior.

To comfort himself, Anton blames his surroundings for his problems: "The cypresses were flames of black fire. . . Something was wrong with the world, not with him"(156). This type of erratic behavior suggests that Anton is stymied from moving forward because of physiological symptoms of events in his past that causes him suffering, which is also connected to his perception of the world around him. The use of strong diction such as "flames" and "black fire" evoke an ominous tone that can be related to Anton's fear of his own health, which only worsens as time progresses.

For instance, when Anton goes to the beach with his family, after having successfully attained his position as an assistant anesthesiologist he goes into a lengthy daze during which he loses his sense of time: "He himself was floating like a dot at its center, in an empty, rose-colored space that was rapidly receding from the world"(127). The "floating dot"(127) and the "solitary man on the barge"(5) are similar in that they emulate the sense of

strangeness that the prologue indicates: “ There was something very strange about it but it was his secret that he didn’t mention to anyone. The secret is revealed through Mulisch’s use of metaphor and diction, with words such as floating and receding, to indicate a lapse in Anton’s thought process that takes him back to his simple, carefree lifestyle, but simultaneously urges the reader to think about Anton’s position and how the past, present and future are all tied together to make a cohesive whole that is Anton’s life up to the climax of his psychological development.

As time progresses, Anton’s perception of time becomes skewed as his mental health gradually deteriorates and as his patience decreases. For example, when given the antidote for his troubles Anton angrily refuses: “ The doctor also left a prescription. . . but Anton tore it at once”(156).

In addition, “ He felt tired and depressed, nightmares troubled his sleep, and the minute he woke up he was plagued with worries and anxieties” The repercussions of the traumatic events of his childhood continue to cause Anton pain, a motif that plays a big role in his characterization as someone who reminisces too much for his/her own good, and so the action of grasping a stick firmly, as stated in the incident in the prologue, can be related to Anton’s method of dealing with the past by holding on to memories steadfastly such as the memory of Truus Coster ingrained in his brain.

Finally, as Anton reaches self-acceptance by letting people into his life he is able to see the light in the midst of the dark which Mulisch reveals through the use of characterization and theme. As Anton learns to listen to other people like Cor Takes and Karin he learns to appreciate the people, things and places that hold true meaning and value. For example, Anton and Cor

Takes, two grown men, start crying after a funeral: “ When Anton saw Take’s tears he begun to weep himself. . . They must have been surprised to see two grown men so much affected by the death of a friend”(120). The emotional climax between Cor Takes and Anton reveals the extent to which memories of people, specifically that of Truus Coster, can affect the stability of two grown men. It also reveals the universal theme that emotion speaks across differences, including age, experience, and maturity. Karin, by far had the greatest impact on Anton’s return to normal life because she revealed the most important truth behind Anton’s past: ‘ Tonny, there’s something I have to tell you...My God the lizards! ’”(181).

The contradiction between the complicated repercussions of such a simple accident portrays the shocking truth, which serves as a comparison to the incident in the prologue. Anton describes the solitary man’s primitive means of travel by saying, “ Only in movies about Africa or Asia could one still see such things” which juxtaposes the complicated V shaped ripples caused by the more modern motorboats, representing the ease of travel. The metaphor indicates a very important aspect of the characterization of Anton – someone who took the hard path in life rather than the easier path, which ultimately depends on perspective.

In essence, Anton and the solitary man on the barge share specific characteristics that give the novel meaning and substance, including Anton’s determination to evade his past without any destination and the solitary man’s invariable consistent approach to travel. Despite their differences, including Anton’s inability to see past his own perspective and the traveler’s primitive ways, both individuals portray the theme of continuity and self-

centered nature that any reader could relate to, giving the novel itself much more depth and value. Word Count: 1463 Works Cited Mulisch, Harry. *The Assault*. New York: Pantheon, 1985. Print.