

Surviving trauma in the assault



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Trauma survivors often cope by investing their entire energy into silencing and suppressing the harrowing events of the past. One such survivor is Anton Steenwijk, the protagonist of Harry Mulisch's 1982 novel, *The Assault*. Especially in the first chapter after the "incident", set during the liberation of Amsterdam, Mulisch portrays Anton's experiences and condition as a trauma survivor. By introducing one of the main conflicts in the novel, furthering the characterization of Anton, and through the use of symbolism, Mulisch illustrates how despite one's best attempts of suppressing the past, it is embedded in one's subconscious and cannot be escaped.

One of the main conflicts in Mulisch's novel, is an internal conflict between Anton's desire to move on with his life and his inability to face his past to achieve closure. This directly relates to the notion that one cannot escape their past unless they are willing to confront it. This chapter is crucial in introducing this conflict since it describes Anton's development over the years following the "incident", in which his family was murdered, his house burned, and everything he knew destroyed. Although Anton believes that the war "was never really a part of him or ever would be" (Mulisch, 55), he is not able to go on with his usual life because "[the War] was a part of him so that all in all, he didn't have much left" (56). This indicates that his entire life was now tainted by these atrocious events. To avoid reliving that pain and anguish, he believes that he best attempt to forget the past. However, by doing so he also prevents himself from living a life filled with happiness, ease and hope. For example, Anton prefers "not [feeling] like [his Aunt and Uncle's] son" (56) because this may abate creating emotional or deep connections similar to those in his past. Clearly, Anton craves to forget the

past and move on since he never even “bother[ed] to read any of” (57) the publications about the German Occupation. However, this keeps him cemented in his past as he does not confront the events and permits the memories to live in his subconscious. Hence, his recurring nightmares about the “incident”. This internal conflict between the desire to move on and the refusal to face the past is the reason Anton is miserable for many years and unable to create meaningful connections with others.

The introduction of this conflict is vital for the progression of the novel, as it relates to one of the major themes in the novel about the deleterious effects of suppressing one’s past, and justifies many of Anton’s decisions and actions in the future. Additionally, Mulisch illustrates a crucial dynamic change in Anton’s personality, and thus suggests that despite Anton’s desires to escape the past, it continuously affects his life. During the first episode, Anton is portrayed as a curious and joyous boy who played with other children and spent time reflecting and contemplating ordinary scenes that he often encountered. However, after the incident, Anton “had no desire to know” (57) anything about the war or the fate of his family. This drastic change in his level of curiosity is mainly illustrated through the repetition of Anton’s indifferent attitude towards all information concerning the past. Through indirect characterization, the reader can infer that Anton’s refusal to “read any of [the published War documents]” (57) and his lack of desire to know “any [details]” (56) about his family’s death demonstrates the rapid dissipation of his curiosity that was present during his childhood.

Moreover, prior to the incident Anton was indirectly characterized as a sensitive boy who did not like being forgotten by his family and who craved

the company and affection of others, as shown when he is comforted by Truus in the prison cell. This is in stark contrast to the first chapter of the second episode in which Anton isolates himself from society and does not “take part” in the activities of other “boys his age” (55). Moreover, Anton felt like a guest at his aunt’s and uncle’s house and not “like their son” (56), which indicates a more distant relationship and suggests that he does not wish to get attached to other people. This isolation highlights how the past continues to haunt him despite his efforts to suppress it because he cannot move on with his life. These dynamic characteristics of Anton are vital as they indicate how the past continues to affect his development and character, despite his attempts to separate himself from the agonizing events of his past.

In spite of these aspects of his dynamic characterization, some of Anton’s characteristics remain static. Most importantly, his indifference and impartiality towards those involved in the war remains the same. During the incident, the Nazis are presented through Anton’s perspective since it is written in third person limited. In his depiction of the Nazis he rarely uses biased or judgmental diction, but instead simply perceives them as “soldiers” or “officers” performing their duties. Anton does not harbor any prejudice against the Nazis and views them as ordinary human beings, while others such as Truus- his cellmate- refer to them as “bastards” (37). Anton is able to recognize when they give him a “friendly nod”(43) and was devastated and “breathing [...] convulsively” (49) when Schulz, an officer accompanying Anton to Amsterdam, died. This indifference and lack of discrimination reappears in the second episode through indirect

characterization when Anton struggles to determine whether the “ German man with the scar” (57) was compassionate for not killing Anton as the Nazis “ in Poland and Russia” (58) would have, or cruel because he “ execut[ed] the inhabitants” (58) of Anton’s house. Anton’s inability to formulate an opinion regarding the Nazis is an effect of his internal conflict and refusal to process his past. Moreover, this portrays Mulisch’s criticism of people’s predetermined opinions of others and their incapability of perceiving the Nazis as fellow human beings simply executing their jobs in order to get by.

Furthermore, Mulisch enforces the notion that the past cannot be escaped through his use of symbolism. Mulisch employs symbolism to open the second episode with a depiction of a “ cloud of ash that rises into [the air] from a volcano [...] and continues to rain down [...] for years” (55). This prominent image symbolizes how an incident, such as an erupted volcano, creates a chain of events that may persist for years. Describing this through a natural disaster, such as a volcanic eruption, indicates that the repercussions cannot be prevented as it is a natural progression or fate. Likewise, the diction, such as “ volcano”, “ ash”, and “ rain”, contain a negative and pernicious connotation linked to the “ incident” in Anton’s life. The volcanic eruption stands as a symbol for his burnt down house and the murder of his family, and how even though it is unwelcome, this incident will continuously haunt Anton “ for years” (55). Similarly, the image of the “ complicated braiding of ripples” left behind by a motorboat crossing the quay in the prologue is a crucial depiction of how the “ incident” affects Anton. Furthermore, the “ brief and random glimpses” (57) of the incident that Anton endures during moments of stillness are symbolic for how the

past continues to haunt him. Although Anton believes his “ family had escaped from his memory” (57), they still continue to reappear. The diction Anton uses to describe these moments, such as “ nightmare” and “ hermetic darkness”, convey how desperately he tries to avoid the past. Additionally, the imagery used to describe the dream highlights this chaotic and terrifying moment in time. For instance, the sequence of “ a dark region of cold and hunger and shooting, blood, flames, shouts” (57) creates a sense of urgency and panic, thus portraying Anton’s emotional state at that time. This sequence of oppressive diction uses sensory imagery to address the reader’s sense of sight, feel, and sound, suggesting how vivid these memories are in Anton’s mind. Essentially, these flashes of memories from the past symbolize how despite his efforts to suppress it, they continue to reappear. These symbols are imperative in order for Mulisch to portray the permanent effect of the past on Anton’s life.

Mulisch exposes how one’s past is inescapable and ingrained in one’s mind, despite all attempts to suppress and expunge it. The use of symbolism, characterization and internal conflict clarify this notion. Throughout the novel, Anton continuously runs into his past and is eventually forced to face the horrifying incident which ultimately liberates him from his past and allows him to move on with his life. Mulisch instills the idea that even though the world was liberated from German occupation and the torture was physically over, the torture did not cease to exist in the minds of the victims. Thus, Anton represents a society of millions of individuals who were lucky enough to survive the war, but suffered such huge losses, so that they were incapable of moving on from their past.