

The Coincidental Nature of Life, and the Ambiguity of Guilt,  
shown in Harry Mulisch, *The Assault*

Our life is shaped by numerous, memorable, and sometimes hurtful events. However, what we remember is often times not the whole story; a single action ripples through the lives of many, influencing them each in a distinct way. In his book, *The Assault*, Harry Mulisch traces the life of Anton Steenwijk, a boy maturing to manhood through the years following World War Two in the Netherlands, as well as the tragic murder case of his childhood. Through Anton's encounters with the others involved, Mulisch reveals the coincidental and convoluted nature of life, and the ambiguity of guilt and innocence, as Anton continually suffers from the repercussions of the traumatic night.

Life does not easily lend itself to a simple explanation, as it is driven largely by coincidence, rather than causality. Such a fact is revealed as Anton's story unveils; The murder case of the Nazi police officer, Ploeg, which leads to the death of his family, is almost completely driven by coincidence. Ploeg's dead body was laid where it was by mere chance, Anton's brother Peter is arrested because German officers coincidentally arrived just as he was stealing Ploeg's gun, and Anton himself was saved because the Germans "had forgotten him" inside the police car and was taken to his uncle. Anton was able to escape death only because there had been the "mix-up" in the German police's handling of the incident; the rest of his life, therefore, is merely result of this simple accident—Anton is shown to be subconsciously aware of this fact, as later, when he tries to imagine a life without the incident, "[it] confused

him so much that he quickly put it aside.” When this terrible nightmare is brought to an end, and Anton meets his uncle, the randomness of the event is symbolically suggested: as Anton reaches for an object in his pocket, he finds that “it was one of the dice,” from a game he was playing with his family, just before the incident began.

Anton’s subsequent encounters with other significant characters are also driven greatly by chance. His encounter with Fake, the son of the killed Nazi officer, was at a rally against communism; His meeting with Saskia, his wife, was during his travel in England; his conversation with Takes, the resistance member that killed Ploeg, was initiated because he overheard a conversation in a café; and his talk with Karin, his childhood neighbor, was during an anti-nuclear rally. Such a seemingly convenient plot device is not installed for practical purposes, but for its relevance to the theme, as indicated in the last chapter: the narrator suggests that although we commonly think “that events somehow already exist in the future,” in fact, “nothing exists in the future; it is empty; one might die at any minute,” suggesting that the future is intrinsically unclear and random, referencing the inherent complexity of human life.

Various analogies scattered throughout the narration also hint at the common theme of coincidence and complexity. Crossword puzzles, Anton’s hobby, is analogous to the convoluted and intertwined relationships in Anton’s life, emphasized in the fact “that most letters had a double function in both a horizontal and a vertical word.” The songs that play at seemingly random intervals, incidentally fit with Anton’s interior monologue or his current situation, such as the one that stirs up memories during his revisit to Haarlem, or the one that is played on the radio after Takes mentions his lover. One of the most fitting analogies, however, is that of the rippling water of the river that Anton enjoys observing during his childhood. Young Anton tries

to follow the complicated pattern of the waves made by the passing boats, but every time he tries, “[it] became so complex that he could no longer follow.” This is representative of Anton’s subsequent life—the effects of the night of the incident ripples out to everyone involved, but such effects are so entangled, that in the end, it is impossible to establish a causal relationship. Anton is able to reconcile with his memories only when he realizes this complexity, as he understands that, “the waves subside, [...] and all is silent once more.” Anton’s sense of closure regarding the incident is not attained by the knowledge of its facts. Rather, it is Mulisch’s intention to reveal that an ending is not achieved by the comprehension of life’s patterns, but the acknowledgement of its complexity and randomness.

Just like life, the notion of guilt and innocence is as ambiguous and complex; oftentimes it is difficult to pinpoint the offenders, even when there is a multitude of victims. Such an idea is communicated in Mulisch’s symbolism, delivered through the words of Truus Coaster—Take’s partner in Ploeg’s murder. During Anton’s brief encounter with her in the cell just after the incident, she introduces the young boy to her interpretation of the War, the fight between light and dark: “Light, yes, but light is not always just light. [...] Hate is the darkness, and that’s no good. And yet we’ve got to hate Fascists, and that’s considered perfectly all right.” Her suggestion that “we, the resistance,” have to “[become] a little bit like [the fascists] in order to fight them,” presents to Anton and the reader the possibility of a coexistence between these two opposing concepts, the prospect of intermingling light and dark. “That’s why,” as Truus says, “it’s more difficult to us (the light). [...] for us it’s more complicated,” as Anton will understand as he continually faces difficulties reconciling with this ambiguity, later in his life.

Mulisch's description of the night of the incident, described in considerable detail, also alludes to this theme of ambiguity, with the contrasting image of light and dark: Just after the murder, Anton notices the sky, and the contrast between "the amazing starry sky," and the "darkness" of the night overshadowing Ploeg's dead body; inside the German convoy, Mulisch narrates that the night was "dark and light at the same time;" in the German commander's office, Anton observes the "glistening ice [falling] out of the dark sky." These intermingling images of light and dark during the incident symbolically represent the complex morality regarding in its circumstances, foreshadowing the entangled notions of victim and offender, guilt and innocence, that will later be presented through Anton's conversations with others involved.

The three conversations, which take place in 1956, 1966, and 1981, respectively, retell the incident from the perspective of each character, further complicating the role of victim and offender. Fake, the son of the supposedly vile and cruel Nazi officer Ploeg, presents himself as a victim, saying how "[the police] arrested [his] mother and put her in a camp," who later "had to become a cleaning woman to support [the family]," while he himself ended up "[working] for a household appliance store." Takes, the supposed victor of the situation with his murder against evil brilliantly executed, is portrayed as "a sloppy, unhappy drunk in a basement [...]" while war criminals are being freed and history ignores him," as a Resistance member who refuses to part with the War as well as his long-dead lover—during their conversation, Mulisch explicitly writes that "Anton was no longer simply a victim [in this talk]; he was vicariously taking part in the violence of the assault." Mr. Korteweg, the neighbor who moved Ploeg's corpse to the front of the Steenwijk's and indirectly caused their death, did so because he knew that the adjacent house

was “hiding Jews [...] A young family with a small child,” and was nevertheless so possessed by guilt to Anton that he “committed suicide.” All three characters reveal their ongoing pain and guilt, which was not directly caused by their own actions, but merely by the circumstances. This is what jeopardizes Anton’s initial notion that he himself was the lone victim—only later does he realize this fact, when he complains to Takes that he has a headache—a representation of his suppressed memories—, merely to get the response: “Who doesn’t?”

Mulisch’s subtle, but sincere style of writing delivers the violence of the War in its full brutality, while also showing the perpetual repercussions its victims are forced to endure. His coincidental structuring of the plot, as well as the interweaved symbolism, reveals the complexity of a single event, while Anton’s interactions with the characters show the inability to assign guilt to one party. Fake, Takes, and Korteweg, are all victims, yet villains, suffering within their own interpretations of the same event. Through such descriptions and characterizations, Mulisch discusses the nature of life and morality, as he finally asks, “Was guilt innocent, and innocence guilty? [...] But what does it matter...” When such an ending is achieved, the significance of the opening epigraph can be understood, not only in the context of the War, but as a representation of the ambiguity and complexity, the intermingling of light and dark that surrounds our lives: “By then day had broken everywhere, but here it was still night—no, more than night.”