

**An Analysis of the Roles of Light Imagery and Moral Dilemmas in Harry Mulisch's  
*The Assault***

**Reflective Statement: Harry Mulisch's *The Assault***

In our interactive oral we discussed the cultural and contextual considerations of Harry Mulisch's *The Assault*. During our discussion we covered the role of history and Dutch culture in this novel as well as the differences between the ways in which our relatives deal with their war memories and Mulisch's protagonist, Anton, deals with his.

Through our discussion, we came to a general consensus that although this novel was written for Dutch audiences, it resonates with people of other backgrounds and generations. However, it was brought to our attention that historical specificities are rather important in terms of the authenticity of the novel. Therefore, since the novel was written initially for Dutch readers of Mulisch's generation, certain allusions to Dutch history such as the provos, the Dutch peace movement and the Dutch colonies in Indonesia, resonate with the actualities and make the novel more engaging.

From our discussion, we established the idea that by having the novel jump back and forth in time, Mulisch suggests that individuals cannot have their own identities without incorporating the positive and negative aspects of their pasts.

By discussing the historical allusions in this novel we came to the conclusion that Mulisch draws attention to the role of coincidence and chance in history rather than cause and effect. However, Mulisch illustrates the idea that despite the role of chance in history, there are often parallels in history repeating itself.

We agreed that it is easy to understand the desire for Germans to forget but also make sense of the happenings of World War II by accusing Hitler of being the devil and putting the country under a spell. However, Mulisch believes that one should avoid making such simple moral justifications of the past and come to terms with it instead. Furthermore, we found it difficult to understand how a peaceful cause such as that of the Resistance fighters can be associated with violence. Thus, Mulisch introduces us to the idea of moral complexities by demonstrating that our preconceptions of what went on in the war are not necessarily correct.

I think the most useful part of our interactive oral was finding that our own family members, who have lived through WWII or other wars such as the Iran-Iraq War, do not repress their memories of the war but prefer to learn from them and pass their stories on to later generations.

### **Analysis of the Roles of Light Imagery and Moral Dilemmas in Harry Mulisch’s *The Assault***

In *The Assault*, Harry Mulisch illustrates the moral questions that come into play in the life of a twelve-year-old boy, Anton Steenwijk, during World War II. Despite a banal English translation, Mulisch vividly portrays Anton’s story with the use of symbolism. In doing so, Mulisch forces the reader to question the dilemmas with which Anton is faced. In this compelling novel, Mulisch uses the recurring images of darkness and light to illustrate the ambiguity and complexity of moral dilemmas involving good and evil as well as the known and the unknown.

Mulisch introduces this motif of light and darkness through the novel’s epigraph. When Mulisch cites Pliny the Younger (*Letters*, IV, 16) in saying, “By then day had broken everywhere, but here it was still night—no, more than night”, he sets forth the idea that even in the light there is darkness. Moreover, nothing is purely good or completely evil, for even in the greatest of times there is still hardship. Through the use of light to symbolize the known and the good, and darkness to symbolize the unknown as well as the evil in the world, Mulisch explores the morally ambiguous nature of human beings.

Throughout the novel, contrast between light and darkness serves many purposes. For instance, on pages 35 and 36, Truus describes a night when she walks home alone in the darkness after curfew on Resistance business and waits for day to break in order to find her way. This incident directly relates to the epigraph through the mention of “dawn”; however, here Mulisch uses darkness and light to establish the lack of clarity that one experiences while in “the dark”. Through Truus’s story, Mulisch begins to establish the idea of darkness representing the violence, oppression, and evil involved in

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the work of Resistance fighters. Thus, the epigraph then illustrates that although it may not be apparent on a superficial level, at a closer look, life is filled with moral complexities that are incomprehensible. Much in this way, Truus’s story is a symbolic reflection of her life in which she is unclear about the moral nature of her actions as a Resistance fighter. She tells Anton, “...I was scared...perhaps even more by the silence than by the darkness. I knew that there were lots of people all about, but everything had disappeared. The world stopped at my skin. My fear had nothing to do with the War anymore”(p 36). In this quotation, “the people all about” represent the fact that Truus is aware of the good intentions that unite the Resistance fighters; however, the “disappearance” of everything symbolizes her inability to see the difference between the common crimes of the Resistance and of the Fascists. By saying that the “world had stopped at [her] skin”, Mulisch illustrates Truus’s difficulty with identifying the good in the violent acts she commits. However, Truus ultimately prefers to be uncertain about this dilemma than to leave it in “silence” and not take a stand against what she knows to be definitely immoral: the actions of the Fascists. Thus, through the use of imagery in the epigraph and in Truus’s story, Mulisch starts developing the motif of light and darkness as a means to exploring moral ambiguities.

Perhaps the most obvious use of light imagery in this novel establishes contrast between the known and the unknown. Anton encounters Truus immediately after the Fascists kill his family; however, not only is Anton unaware of his loss, but he is also placed in a cell with a stranger. At the time, Anton cannot make sense of his current situation, and the darkness of the cell emphasizes this uncertainty, for he is unable to see Truus’s face. “He opened his eyes wide to see but the darkness filled them like black

water...as he calmed down, he began to see a pale strip of light...”(p 38-39) In this case, the darkness represents a fear of the unknown while the light represents comfort in the familiar. Moreover, the ambiguity of this situation as well as that of Truus’s unrevealed identity illustrate the moral ambiguity that Truus represents as a Resistance fighter.

Not only does Mulisch use light and darkness to establish a contrast between the known and the unknown, but he also uses this symbolism to further emphasize the morally ambiguous nature of the Resistance fighters’ actions. Mulisch frequently uses historical references to illustrate how often various individuals in differing situations are faced with moral dilemmas. The Resistance fighters in *The Assault*, for instance, are brutal and violent in their killings of WWII figures; however, their intentions are to prevent the German officers from killing more innocent people. Thus, Mulisch brings into question whether it is morally acceptable to behave in a conventionally unacceptable manner for a just cause. In order to illustrate this moral complexity, Mulisch again uses the light and darkness motif when Truus, says, “Hate is the darkness, that’s no good. And yet we’ve got to hate the Fascists, and that’s considered perfectly all right. How is that possible? It’s because we hate them in the name of the light, I guess, whereas they hate only in the name of darkness.”(p 38). Through the use of light and darkness, Mulisch expresses the morally complex role of the Resistance fighters of WWII, thus challenging the modern reader’s preconceptions of the wartime occurrences and realities.

Mulisch also uses this contrasting image of light and darkness to illustrate the morally complex decision of sacrificing one’s own happiness for that of others. Mulisch does so through the relationship between Truus and Takes, two distinguished Resistance fighters who frequently work together. Although Takes is a married man with children,

the two fall in love. However, as a highly ethical woman, Truus refuses to act on her feelings towards Takes. She understands that “[his wife and children] need him, as much as [Anton] needs [his] father and mother...”(p 39). By not acting on her emotions, Truus puts the happiness of others before her own and thus, serves as a symbol of two fundamental dichotomies: love and emotions as opposed to ethics as well as the interest of others as opposed to that of one’s self. Thus, Truus’s life consists of a compilation of various divergent forces that threaten her moral state of being. To illustrate these opposing forces, Mulisch establishes contrast between “rebellious streaks of light [curling] and [flashing] around her head against the dark background”(p 138) when Anton views a photograph of her many years after their encounter. Anton always glorifies Truus, for she is his only source of comfort at a time of great hardship; however, Mulisch later reveals that Truus is not purely a source of good during her lifetime. Thus, Mulisch’s use of symbolism in through light and darkness serves to emphasize the contrasting forces that embody the morally complex nature of Truus’s life.

Mulisch further extends this image of light and darkness to illustrate the lasting effects of the dark war years. Throughout this novel, Anton frequently faces the continuing influence of the war on his life as well as the lives of those whom he encounters. For instance, on page 92, Mulisch illustrates the ways in which being the son of an assassinated German officer becomes detrimental to the life of Fake Ploeg Jr. Although Fake and Anton both lose their parents as a result of the war, the two lead rather different lives. While Anton becomes a successful anesthesiologist due to his interest in forgetting his traumatic wartime childhood, Fake drops in social status due to his father’s role in the war. In order to illustrate such continuing effects of the war,

Mulisch again uses light and darkness in the image of a volcano on page 55. “The cloud of [black] ash...[that] continues to rain down on all its continents for years” represents the continuing effects of the war. However, ambiguity is established again when Fake Ploeg Sr is portrayed on page 92 for the first time as a father rather than simply a Fascist. His son’s grief over losing his father illustrates that humans are not one-dimensional. Thus, Mulisch’s use of light imagery in the form of the volcano both emphasizes the morally ambiguous nature of human beings in which individuals are not simply defined by one characteristic, as well as the ambiguity in the continuing effects of the war.

In Mulisch’s *The Assault*, the use of light and darkness illustrates the complex nature of moral dilemmas. Through Mulisch’s use of imagery, this novel investigates moral dilemmas ranging from choosing ethics instead of love to choosing others over one’s self. The recurring images of darkness and light cause the reader to develop a heightened ability to distinguish the underlying meaning behind this repetition. Although at first glance it may appear excessive, Mulisch’s use of imagery ultimately serves as an effective technique to artfully enrich the content and themes of the novel and express an understanding of history that had only begun to flourish during the time of the novel’s publication.

### **Bibliography**

Mulisch, Harry. *The Assault*. New York: Pantheon, 1985. Print.