



IT'S EASIER TO GET INTO A HOLLOW THAN COME OUT OF ONE: EXPLORING *THE DISCOMFORT OF EVENING* AS AN ANTI- BILDUNGSROMAN NARRATIVE

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Abstract

Published in 2018, The Discomfort of Evening by Marieke Lucas Rijneveld offers a profound exploration of child psychology in the face of adversity. This paper explores Rijneveld's work as an Anti-Bildungsroman narrative. This paper argues that Jas, the protagonist of the novel, failed by the adults in her life resorts to self-destructive coping mechanisms that only further her descent into a state of psychological stagnation. The paper examines how pervasive religion is in the family's psyche and how it reflects in their actions and reactions towards the kids. Religion glorifies suffering and thus pain becomes a virtue worthy enough to feel, not resist and actively seek out. Guilt and shame become the primary drives of thoughts and actions in Jas' life. The novel becomes a sincere inquiry of grief and how the palpable nature of it. A kid, supposedly oblivious to worldly concerns, are capable of and susceptible to emotions they have no control over. The paper ultimately argues that the work becomes a compelling and enduring narrative of an Anti-Bildungsroman novel. Jas does not find a severance with these loops of self-harm. Instead, she is way deeper into a cesspool of mental stasis..

Keywords

The Discomfort of Evening, Anti-Bildungsroman, Childhood, Mental Stagnation, Religious Trauma, Guilt, Neglect, Death, etc.

Full Article

The poet laureate Alfred, Lord Tennyson wrote in his play, *The Foresters: Robin Hood and Maid Marian* (1892), "Hope Smiles from the threshold of the year to come / Whispering 'it will be happier'..." (Act 1, Sc. 3).

The Discomfort of Evening is a contemporary Dutch novel by Marieke Lucas Rijneveld, published in 2018. Translated into English by Michele Hutchison, the novel is a narrative by a ten-year-old Jas who lives with her family in a rural town in the Netherlands. The novel begins with Jas' wish for her brother to be dead instead of her rabbit being granted, and the turmoil and quandaries that ensue. This paper will argue that Jas' trajectory in the discomfort of evening is anti-bildungsroman. It marks the intersection of Dutch Calvinism and childhood psychology. After the death of her brother, Jas doesn't possess 'a more pragmatic consciousness', a marker of the literary genre. Instead, she descends into a cesspool of one battle after another. Faced with the death of a loved one, she becomes unsure of what life is. Jas doesn't share Tennyson's sentiments on hope. After the tragedy that has struck her, life becomes one dark abyss she is forced to look into. Her life goes on while she is frozen in time. She becomes a bystander in her own life. There is no hope, only temporary relief from the never-ending grief.

This paper approaches the protagonist Jas' trajectory in the novel as an anti-bildungsroman. An anti-bildungsroman subverts the conventional coming-of-age story typical of the bildungsroman genre by depicting the protagonist's regression. A rejection of society. A refusal to



mature. There is no optimistic closure, only destructive loops and mental and emotional stagnation.

Bildungsroman is a literary genre that typically features coming-of-age story that shows a protagonist's journey from childhood to adulthood or from a period of inexperience to maturity. Consisting of the German words *Bildung* ('formation' or 'education') and *Roman* ('novel'). Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's work *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795–96) is widely considered as the first example of Bildungsroman novel. Karl Morgenstern was the first to use the term as a concept in the early 19th century and defined this genre as follows: "it portrays the 'Bildung' of the hero in its beginnings and growth to a certain stage of completeness."

A typical bildungsroman would feature a major crisis that forces the main character to come to terms with the harsh realities of the world. They become wiser as a result of the event. Jas in the novel faces a similar crisis as well. Out of childhood spite, she wishes her brother Matthies would die instead of her dear rabbit, and so it happens. A ten-year-old Jas finds it hard to comprehend this event. She isn't any the wiser but even perplexed at the turn of events. Like any feeling of losing a loved one, Jas attempts to escape her reality. "...I realized that I could also pretend my ears were blocked, that they'd been tied in a permanent knot" (19).

Jas' family are Reformed Christians. Reformed Christians believe in the authority of Scripture, the absolute sovereignty of God and salvation by god's grace. They also believe that God has predestined all the events that have ever happened since the beginning of time. Throughout the novel, one observes the family's enmeshment with religion. Jas' family, the village and the priest all believe that suffering equals grace. Christ died for the believers' suffering and still begged god to forgive those who wronged him. This becomes the blueprint for adults to attempt to emulate, but it does not lead to divine grace. The containment and repression of their emotions and grief only leads to resentment. The mimetic child who looks up to adults for guidance makes them their blueprint in life.

But kids, absolved of the privilege of age, can't rage when in mental agony. They have to act in ways adults deem fit. Jas and her siblings, unable to make sense of the surroundings that have now become uncanny and uncomfortable, act up in other ways. The religious framework does not provide them with a robust set of beliefs to actually believe and find respite in. It just becomes another act that they are forced to put up in front of their elders. Any skepticism and ensuing questioning is shunned and looked down on. At one point, Jas recalls, "I suddenly think of the time that Dad took hold of me by my hood. Matthies has only been dead a couple of weeks. I'd asked Dad why we aren't allowed to talk about him (...). When I asked Dad that question, he'd picked me up by my hood and hung me from the red peg" (247).

An innocuous child who's worried for her brother decides to ask a question to the person who's supposed to tend to her. What she receives is belittlement. The Dad goes on to declare that the god asks questions around the house and displays further cruelty. He suggests Jas could hang there until Matthies comes back. To this, a genuine Jas who aches for her brother asks, "When's he coming back?" The Dad says, "When your feet are back on the ground" (248). Jas quickly realizes it would be futile to look for reassurance in her elders. They feel they've failed their dead son, now failing to grasp the depth of agony the living feel.

The church views suffering and discomfort as divine trials, and those that do not question god's intentions emerge victorious. These are viewed as divine acts of righteousness. Jas' parents are clearly devastated at their son's death. Jas overhears a conversation where they discuss their pregnancy before marriage and the abortion they had to maintain their respectability in society. Jas' parents believe that it is god's way of punishing their sin. Unable to come to terms with their son's death, they can't provide their kids the help and closure they deserve. Often ridiculed for her red coat, Jas continues to wear it. The uncomfortable coat becomes her cilice, her purgatory. The



coat also acts as an emotional sheathing. To catch her when she collapses. She can't trust the adults with it. They seem too fragile themselves. The color red is also a grim reminder of the death she is constantly surrounded by. Blood, slaughterhouses, her brother Matthies and the wounds she inflicts on herself.

In a society as orthodox as this, punishment becomes tantamount to discipline. Actions speak louder than words. So, punishing the kid would guarantee better results than actually talking to them. Adam Mars-Jones, in his review of the book, "Cows Are More Important", writes, "The values of the Dutch Reformed Church as inculcated by the Mulders set more store by chastening than reward, to the point where it can seem that rewards are only there to be taken away. Dad removes the luminous stars from the ceiling of Jas's bedroom when her performance at school is unsatisfactory, and Mum makes her take a hammer to her piggy bank to pay a forfeit after she breaks off a row of miniature plastic trees from an old model of Thunderbird Island. The piggy bank has a hole which would allow her to extract the money, but Mum insists on a more dramatic punishment."

Jas witnesses that guilt and suffering are deemed necessary through her parents. She notes of her Mum, "She can never take a day off from thinking that because she'd feel guilty; she believes that everyone should bear their sins like lines for punishment in an exercise book" (77). Obbe, Jas' elder brother, displays signs of a growing resentment. Unlike Jas, he doesn't desperately try to contain his feelings. He expresses his anger. In a parochial and patriarchal world, male expression of anger or abandonment is often more acceptable than female expression of the same. When the mum expresses her desire to die, "' I want to die,' she repeated, I've had enough. If a car ran over me tomorrow and left me as flat as a squashed hedgehog, I'd be happy" (233-234).

Obbe, in a fit of rage, asks her to drop dead. Jas, who is terribly worried about her mother, asks him to stop, but he goes on to say, "Do it then-kill yourself-otherwise I'll murder you all!" (234). One can imagine Obbe's rage because the kids feel forbidden to express their grief, but the parents indirectly keep on burdening them with theirs. Throughout the novel, we also observe Jas obsessing over her dad leaving the family. He threatens the family several times but arrives back just in time for coffee. Jas understands that many a time, adults do not mean what they say, but she finds it hard to figure out when. The coping mechanisms the children have developed are egregious. Obbe and Jas engage in incestual activities that show how the kids use physical stimulation to numb themselves and their anxiety. Instead of guiding her younger sister Hanna, Jas puts her through examinations and trials. She attempts to introduce Hanna to her warped world. They represent collective regression. These coping mechanisms provide Jas with a momentary sense of control. Jas and Hanna, unsuspecting kids, experiment with masturbation without realizing what it is. The children are growing up in an environment of religious orthodoxy and livestock-rearing. Bodies are meant to be useful, to further the species. The children come up with ways to make their body useful for distractions from their tragic and perplexing reality. In a household so consumed with grief and without any grown-up guiding them through the intimidating labyrinth of a rapidly changing body, they are forced to navigate other ways to make sense of their world.

The traditional bildungsroman novel would show the protagonist metamorphosing into an adult ready to take on the world. Jas, on the other hand, remains unmoored from her grief. Having bargained her rabbit for her brother, Jas believes her family's safety depends on these cosmic transactions. Sacrifices are made hoping that would satiate the almighty's appetite and her family would escape further catastrophes. Jas realizes the brutal indifference of life. The cows get foot-and-mouth disease and have to be put down. The animals are routinely slaughtered. By releasing these animals to death, she believes she is saving them from a fate far worse—life. Jas tries to



project the discomfort she feels onto these creatures, hoping someone would feel the same way she does and experience some connectedness.

Jas is touched inappropriately by the veterinarian while in the room with her father, who doesn't pay heed. Unaware of the ill intentions, Jas appreciates the attention and looks at the veterinarian as someone she can pin her hopes on. We also witness Jas dreaming about a man who would arrive in the village just in time to save her. In the essay, "Childhood trauma in Marieke Lucas Rijneveld's *The Discomfort of Evening: A Reading*", Sheriff and Naresh reference Colette Dowling's 1981 work *The Cinderella Complex: Women's Hidden Fear of Independence* and argue that Jas has the Cinderella Complex. "Dowling used the analogy of the fairytale character Cinderella, who cooks and cleans for her abusive stepmother but ultimately is rescued and taken care of by "Prince Charming." Colette Dowling proposed in her work that women are conventionally socialized from birth, as they usually tend to rely on others—especially men—as they think that they are protective. Therefore, Dowling takes the example of Cinderella's story who dutifully performs all the household chores at her stepmother's commands but is eventually saved by her "Prince Charming." It is observed that in some cases, children, especially young girls, who go through trauma at an early stage are also susceptible to the Cinderella complex, as seen in Jas' case: "That's right. I'm looking for a man to save me from this terrible village. Someone who is very strong. And handsome. And kind". Jas fantasizes about the man who is most likely to save her. She contemplates a Dutch singer, Boudewijn de Groot, rescuing her, as she likes listening to his music but starts to develop an interest towards a middle-aged veterinarian who visits them regularly."

The family clearly hasn't processed Matthies' death. They attempt several ways to numb or distract themselves from the pain. The Mum is practically starving herself which adds to Jas' growing list of worries. Obbe concocts several ways, often abusive, to occupy his days. The father puts his faith in rigorous physical labor and emotional detachment. What would be better than feeling these overwhelming and piercing emotions? To feel nothing at all. Jas, in a moment of self-loathing, puts a toad in her gumboot and crushes it, hoping the physical and mental agony she feels would help, but to no avail. "I don't want to feel any sadness, I want action; something to pierce my days, like bursting a blister with a pin so that the pressure is eased" (233). It is clear that Jas tries hard to repress her pain, but when it becomes too much to take, she resorts to self-harm. Their home is consumed by death and so are Jas' days. The house froze the day Matthies died. Jas can't escape it, so she chooses to surrender to the grim thoughts and do whatever she can to protect her family. Having confronted a loved one's death so early on in life, she can't help but fear for the ones she is left with. "I promise to God that I'll take another bout of diarrhea if He brings them home safely" (49).

These lines again are reflective of the transactional relationship with the divinity that Jas has come to understand. The religious trauma is very evident in the novel. The human body is considered a space for sin and deceit. The Granny quotes the book of Jeremiah "The heart is deceitful above all things, yes, and desperately wicked: who can know it" (51).

In coming-of-age narratives, water is a symbol of rebirth, baptism and a cleansing of sorts. In Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), we see the troubled protagonist Blanche Dubois taking several baths because she desperately wants to escape her past that, like a beast of prey, is on the watch to ambush her. In the discomfort of evening, the protagonist Jas wants to escape and numb the agony her brother's death causes her every day, but she also feels it unfair to not be reminded of him. It would just confirm the permanence of his absence. Swimming also becomes a particularly difficult task for Jas because Matthies died by drowning. For Jas, water isn't a symbol of cleansing or nascency; it becomes a grim reminder of her brother's lost life. An act like swimming, once accomplished, would make one more confident, but Jas has



greater worries. She knows the water can't wash away her guilt and grief and therefore is of no use to her. If anything, it is a trap, her brother's tomb that would just push her further into the abyss of sorrow.

"It wouldn't be fair not to cry about Matthies but then cry about myself" (74). For Jas and her family, grief and guilt go hand in hand. The family, the Mum and Jas, to be specific, make their body the site of their suffering. Jas remarks, "Sadness ends up in your spine. Mum's back is getting more and more bent" (65). Jas punishes herself with these acts of cruelty, often exercised on herself, sometimes others. They can't fight the discomfort. They clearly believe it to be a necessity. The priest in the novel says, Discomfort is good. In discomfort, we are real" (137).

The novel does not offer a closure or a resolution. Jas is deeply entangled in her self-destructive ways and cannot find respite. Instead of looking forward in life, she keeps on walking in circles. She desperately tries to escape the grief her brother's death has caused her but ends up with a consistent mental agony. She feels guilty and thus refuses to part with it. "Without giving it any further thought, I kick the pole out from under the lid and whisper, 'I'm coming, dear Matthies.' A loud bang follows, the freezer light flips off. Everything is pitch dark and silent now. Icily silent" (282).

The Discomfort of Evening presents to us a narrator who is deeply troubled and broken. Unable to find comfort in the grown-ups around her, she turns inward. Sometimes, she acts as if she's hardened, but the feelings catch up again. Jas sometimes tries to stay afloat and sometimes surrenders to the grief holding her down. The author presents a compelling narrative of a young girl with her entire life ahead of her, unable to get out of the hollow the tragedy has forced her into. The protagonist does not become poised or more pragmatic. She is in hiding. From her family, from the world and from herself. She feels it is deceiving to move on while her brother is no more. He can no longer look forward to an ice-skating session. He can no longer sit with his family and dine. He's no longer a concern for the world. Jas feels it a grave injustice to try and escape this purgatory. What if she changes and her brother, now only alive in memory, fades away?

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