

## Trauma: The Element That Defines Heroes

People are shaped by different factors in life, but the most common thread among many characters in literary fiction is that trauma is that defining factor. In the case of the main characters Eren Yeager of *Attack on Titan* (*Shingeki no Kyojin*) written by Hajime Isayama and Ken Kaneki from *Tokyo Ghoul* (*Tōkyō Gūru*) written by Sui Ishida. Both these characters are from two different Japanese manga but both characters share similar trauma. Trauma is defined as a wound in the mind that affects your memories, to the point where you can only be healed by authoring a new meaning to those memories, by creating a new identity from those painful memories. Eren and Kaneki both go through very similar trauma but have different reactions towards it, and create different identities for themselves from it. This is seen in how they view the world, themselves, and the problem that the world they live in propagates. Both have very different, but very similar ways of looking at and understanding these issues because both are heroes in their own right, but both are not the same type of hero.

### **Trauma:**

To properly understand trauma, it is important to define it, and how it affects people's memories, imagination, and identity. When it comes to trauma, memory plays a huge part in how it can be seen by those dealing with it and how it is remembered by the individual experiencing it. Emily Keightley and Michael Pickering in their book *The Mnemonic Imagination* "The main implication of memory conceived as a changing patchwork is that the subject remembered by the remembering subject alters and shifts from one period of his life to another, along with the meanings and values of autobiographical memories in their more varied and complete ensemble." (Keightley & Pickering, 2014, p.20) Memory is seen as something that is never in a permanent state by how it's remembered, but more as something that is constantly shifting because of where the person who is recollecting said memories is in life. Keightley and Pickering make note of how people use memory to define who they are "the remembering subject engages imaginatively with what is retained from the past and, moving across time, continuously rearranges the hotchpotch of experience into relatively coherent narrative structures, the varied elements of what is carried forward being given meaning by becoming employed into a discernable sequential pattern. It is that pattern which is central to the definition of who we are and how we have changed." (Keightley & Pickering, p.44) Trauma is when this pattern is broken, the individual now lives with broken scenes of memory that they cannot go back to since it is too painful to relive. Therefore in that way, the person's life is going backward instead of forwards since they are not fully able to process the painful experiences that they had to live through, this leads to confusion about how they view themselves since now this person has the option of either standing still in the trauma or deriving meaning from it. Eren and Kaneki are characters who both live with broken memories, so as they try to derive meaning from their trauma, they have been struggling to do so since it is as if they are trying to fill a glass with water that has a bunch of holes in it. The narrative aspect of this analogy is that, as each character tries to fix a part of their world before fixing themselves, they only screw up that part of the world they are trying to fix.

## Eren and His Trauma:

When Eren is first introduced to the reader, he is shown to be more of a bright-eyed innocent child. As someone innocent to the way the world and the way it operates. He has grown up behind the Shiganshina walls, thinking that the scouts were heroes and wanting to be one of them, not realizing that they act as cannon fodder against the Titans, and do not make progress against them. Then, when the colossal titan appears, and destroys Eren's hometown and he sees the people he knew being eaten by titans or killed by falling debris; the safety that Eren felt behind the walls is now gone. To add to Eren's trauma, he has to watch as a titan eats his mother while she cannot run away because her body was crushed by the falling debris from the Shiganshina wall. She is just as helpless in her death as is Eren, who can do nothing but watch as he gets carried away to safety; as he sees his mother being eaten and her blood splattered everywhere, leaving none of her remains behind. This traumatic event sparks feelings of hatred and revenge deep down inside Eren. This longing for revenge against the Titans and this need to kill them all will be the source of Eren's identity for the rest of the series. Steven L Berman states that "Identity is a collective term for the roles, goals, roles, and values that people adopt to give their lives direction and purpose" (Berman, 2016). So as Eren tries to shape his identity around killing the Titans and getting revenge, it instead evolves into something more; as Eren grows older and learns that the Titans are not the ones to blame. It is the country of Marley, who wants him and the people of Eldia dead. However, by that time, all Eren had ever known to accomplish his goals was through violence, so he feels the only way to attain this freedom that he so willfully desires is through violence and death. The issue with Eren's thinking is that he can no longer separate who he truly is and what his trauma has turned him into. He can only keep pushing forward using the ideology that he has created, which makes his actions morally grey instead of black and white. The more Eren sought to enact his revenge on those whom he had believed to be the source of his trauma, the more Eren started to lose his moral compass as he had to face the question of whether or not what he was doing was right or wrong. This is evident in the conversation he has with Reiner before he attacks the marlayean empire. Reiner tells him it was his fault that his mother was eaten, that his hometown was destroyed and that he is the one to blame. However, Eren responds with "It's okay, as I thought. You and I are very much alike [...] I must keep pushing forward to destroy the enemy" (Isayama Attack On Titan, Vol. 25). Eren realizes that he is not so different from Reiner both are people who must become morally grey to achieve peace for their people. Eren understands why Reiner had to do what he did but that would not stop Eren from doing what he knows how to do, which is to kill. Eren let his trauma shape him into the monster of his own story, to be the villain of friends and peers if that meant their freedom would be secure. Kaneki, unlike Eren, is more of a character who has grown up only to experience hardship and trauma throughout their life. Both are characters who will do anything to protect their family and loved ones, but Kaneki had to suffer through much more to do so. Kaneki's identity is not linked to one traumatic event but several throughout the series. The major ones that shape his character are the abuse he suffered from his mother, being tortured by Jason, being badly

wounded by Arima, and having his body destroyed by Juuzhou and his assistant investigator. During these events, there are many signs that Kaneki could be suffering from DID (Dissociative Identity Disorder) which is a mental illness for those who suffer from having multiple identities. This mental illness is typically created through severe trauma, either in physical, emotional, mental, or sexual abuse. In the case of Kaneki, who had suffered from many forms of physical abuse throughout the series, arose each time with a new identity (which can be identified by mannerisms or changes in hair color). Each traumatic event had changed Kaneki, making him develop a new identity out of the ashes of the old one, who had to die for him to survive each traumatic event. Each of Kaneki's different identities that form would be used to cover up for the frailties of the personality that came before it. However, what was different in each is that there is a progression in growing who he is and growing towards his goals. Negin Heidarizadeh states "Significantly, trauma does not always have a negative meaning. It is a movement which illustrates an episode of changing which begins from trauma, suffering, and pain to knowledge and understanding" (Heidarizadeh, p.791). All of the trauma that Kaneki went through, he went through it to have a greater understanding of the people he wanted to protect and save. For Kaneki, when he became a ghoul it was traumatic since he almost died, then when he woke up his whole life had been changed. Even when he came very close to killing and eating his friend Hide, he decided to protect him instead. After this, he starts trying to save his friends at the Anteki coffee shop. Then when he is tortured by Jason, he learns he is not strong enough to protect the people he loves, so he creates a new identity to fulfill his goals. Then when he learns that he still cannot protect them, no matter how strong he is, the newest traumatic event causes him to lose his memory, then the identity, Haise Sasaki forms, and befriends the people of the CCG who he has been fighting against all that time. After he realized that he had changed between Haise and Kaneki because he wanted to protect his loved ones in the CCG and at Anteki, but he cannot do both as Haise, so he decides that he has to let Haise rest so that Kaneki can protect everyone, not just ghouls or humans, and bring both groups together in peace. Kaneki goes through his journey, trying to protect everyone but is divided and is repeatedly traumatized for doing so, but pushes onward because he will do what it takes to save his friends and mold the world into a better place for ghouls and humans. Kaneki uses his trauma as a way to heal and bring peace to others; this sentiment is portrayed when he states while talking to the members of the organization "GOAT", "'Ghouls must be eradicated,' 'We must kill and feed on humans to survive.' Our adversarial relationship hasn't changed...because neither has tried to meet halfway. Humans and Ghouls and understand each other. The fact that I was once humans is proof of that." (Ishida et al. 97-98). Kaneki is a union of those divided people and is the only one who can bring them together. Kaneki used his trauma to give him the ability to create a place of peace for both ghouls and humans, while Eren used his trauma to justify the monster he must become to save his people.

In any type of narrative, the setting plays a huge part in the overall story, affecting the atmosphere and the characters that are placed within the setting. On Paradis Island, where Eren Yeager grew up, played a huge part in the character he was at the beginning of the story to the person he became at the end of the story. Paradis island was mostly known for housing the only living inhabitants to be on this island, who were humans of the Eldian nationality, human-eating monstrosities called titans, roaming the island and having many walls that the aforementioned

Eldian humans lived behind to protect them from these abominations. Many of the people who lived behind these walls had little to no knowledge of what the world looks like, beyond the walls, this group of people includes Eren. Eren has grown up with this natural longing for freedom, the discovery of the new, and not being shackled down by anyone or anything. This is the reason why Eren was drawn to survey corps of the island military; the survey corps go beyond the wall and venture on to see what the outside world is, which is why Eren was so drawn to them and wanted to join them so badly. Eren sees the walls and Titans as things that are limiting his freedom. As the story progresses, the freedom that Eren seeks transforms from freedom to explore, to freedom to be allowed to exist. As the world starts to be revealed more and more to Eren, he slowly learns that the world does not want him to exist and that the world has found a way to feel justified in that thinking. However, due to the trauma that Eren had endured the only thing he knew was how to kill anything that threatened his freedom. Eren does not know how to exist and experience freedom in the small things. This is evident when Eren and his friends go to the sea for the first time. His friends are all playing in the water, experiencing freedom and joy that they were never able to experience behind the walls. Enjoying the fact that they were able to laugh, experience the sea and enjoy each other's company. Armin, one of Eren's close friends, finds a beautiful shell; but Eren takes no notice of this and only focuses and asks his friends, "If I kill everyone over on the other side of the sea then will we truly be free?" The setting that Attack On Titan takes place in, is a world of no freedom which only causes the trauma in Eren's mind to fester even more and meld his lack of freedom he feels with how he views the world. With Tokyo Ghoul the setting can seem very similar but in a modern world. The main story of Tokyo Ghoul is based in a Japan that has been split into several numbered districts. A world where either you are a human or a ghoul. Kaneki lives in a world where only three types of people exist; those who hate ghouls for existing, those who think humans are lesser than ghouls, or those who want to co-exist together in peace and harmony. The divide of the world that Kaneki lives in is similar to the divide within Kaneki's mind. He often cannot decide the best course of action because the world around him does not know either. As Kaneki has been all three types of people that exist in this world at some point, he can understand that coexistence is possible because he is a living representation of that, as he is half-human and half-ghoul. Kaneki at different points in the story had to decide who he was going to side with, the humans or the ghouls. However, in each situation, the world punishes him for taking either side. Both Eren and Kaneki are a representation of what the setting of their worlds has made them into. The trauma that they had experienced was inflicted onto them by the people of their respective worlds. It was not a singular person who was the source of their trauma, but the source of their world's disarray and how it had molded them into the people they became. The world that Kaneki and Eren both come from can be seen as very similar but how they view the world and how they plan on fixing it is where they differ.