



WHERE FACT AND FICTION CONVERGE

The Ferocious and the Fragile

How does nature shape a person?
The analysis of Eren Jaeger.

By Reem Mahmoud

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All credits go to Isayama Hajime, the author of Attack on titan. This book is an analysis of his character Eren Jaeger, the main character of the manga.

Of course, I recommend that all people should go and read Attack on titan, it won't disappoint! With great character development, unexpected storylines, unforgettable storylines, and the connection of reality and fiction.

This analysis contains spoilers, read at your own risk.

Isayama, Hajime. *Shingeki No Kyojin*. Kōdansha, 2011.

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Prologue

Eren Jaeger's character conclusion and motives reveal led people to believe that his personality was inexplicably ruined. In reality, this ending was the only logical ending and was written in a way that elevated his character to a level that very few could foresee.

Understanding Eren takes a deep dive into the entire story, an open mind to comprehend, and a willingness to reconsider preconceptions and past expectations. Eren's story is a fascinating piece of character writing grounded in philosophy, revealing the truth of freedom.

His character is impossible to understand unless there is a full comprehension of his motivations and character development. Crucial aspects of his character are often overlooked, and this drastically impacts the understanding.

If Eren grew up in a different environment, how would his nature change?

Would therapy be able to help him?

Chapter 1: Mistaken Freedom

The beginning of his motivations was to wipe out and get rid of all the titans, the monsters that had stolen humanity's freedom. He fought them blindly without considering what the titans were, or why they attack the humans. But he knew that once the titans were wiped out, humanity would have its freedom back.

Every new development of the story began to test Eren's single-minded understanding. His knowledge about titans being simple monsters was overwritten with a theory that there is more behind the titans, when it was revealed that he had the power to become one of these monsters.

Later, a revealing occurs where he learns that one of his friends destroyed the walls, causing the breach of Shiganshina and the tragedy that led to the loss of his mother.

Soon after, it was revealed that every single abnormal or mindless titan was a human trapped against their will.

Then afterward it was considered that humanity's true enemy was itself and not the titans.

Every aspect of this development raised new theories and questions about the nature of their conflict.

Who's the true enemy?

Who exactly are we fighting against?

These are questions that Eren began to ask himself as he reconsidered his mindset and misunderstandings. Upon reaching his father's basement in the demolished city of Shiganshina, the truth of their world, hidden amongst his father's books was revealed. This discovery flipped Eren's perception of the world upside down. The truth forces him to confront his worldview drastically, altering the direction of his character.

As he changed from the innocent dream and understanding of "If we destroy all these titans, we can go beyond the walls and see the sea." To the complex understanding that, "There are enemies beyond these walls, and when we destroy the titans, beyond the sea lies our true enemies."

Amid this maelstrom of horror, terror, pain and a few glimmers of hope, we find Eren, who is a mixed bag of traits. He's aggressive, stubborn, very hot-tempered, impulsive, and has an absolute vicious streak to him. But he's also a trauma victim, a devoted friend and comrade, strongly empathetic, and in some ways idealistic. Even the fury and aggression themselves are at least in part motivated by his strong sense of justice, hatred and pain he feels in seeing himself and others wronged.

As a kid, Eren had never questioned the world around him, accepting things as they were. He never had the aspirations of leaving the walls or joining the scouts (army).

So when and why did Eren's transfection on freedom begin?

Eren's desire for freedom is an inherent part of him, that was only awakened once he realized that he was never free. When Armin (his best friend) showed him a book about the outside world, Eren realized that he was essentially a bird caged away from the world. The realization hit him hard, knowing that Armin had a dream of exploring the outside world while he had nothing. He was entranced when listening to Armin speak about his dream, but he never understood what Armin was captivated by.

Armin's dream was simple: Exploring the outside world, driven by a sense of wonder.

On the other hand, Eren did not have the same sense of wonder, instead he interpreted what he saw in the book about the world fundamentally different.

Instead of feeling curiosity towards the world, the book only showed him his own lack of freedom. He didn't see wondrous landscapes full of mystery, he saw the vast empty earth that was taken from the people locked behind walls.

He only wanted the freedom that taking back the world would give him.

In addition to that, Eren realized that the people who were able to see what was taken from them were free.

His understanding was that, Freedom is something inherent that everyone has at the moment of birth, and could only be taken away by outside factors.

Eren sought freedom because he had initially been born with it but he had been locked away from it. This mindset had become Eren's motivation for his actions as he aged.

His overwhelming will to fight was driven by the desire to see the vast empty free world beyond the walls, and his desire for freedom was the desire to see what was depicted in Armin's book. Freedom is what is in the book, and he is never free until he had seen it for himself. Eren's drive for freedom was a corruption of Armin's childlike wonder. His lack of freedom brought him outrage towards their world, and the vast differing understanding between the friends inevitably led to conflict.

In Eren's ideal scenario, he believed that after revealing the truth of the outside world hidden amongst the books in his father's basement, this would be the end of his journey seeking freedom. He would finally be free and full of hope. The happy ending that he had envisioned for himself, and his friends was that they would be able to defeat the titans and reclaim their world.

But only Eren knew that there was no such promised scenery outside the walls, instead, a conflict much worse. The world beyond the walls was controlled by the same enemies who sent the titans to slaughter them. A

world of racism, in which they were thought of as monsters who needed to be wiped out. A world of which racism led to children being fed alive to dogs.

The world depicted in Armin's book had always been an idyllic fantasy that never existed.

Eren's journey has been one in which his view of the world is constantly tested and changed. In the near future, he comes to understand that the people he considers his enemies were no different from himself. His journey is one of gaining understanding and empathy.

However, Eren's pursuit of freedom was antithetical to the understanding he spent time developing. His idea of freedom was built off of the assumption that their conflict was a simple one, that simply defeating the titans would gain their freedom.

He inherently values freedom above all morals, becoming a slave to his dream. With the contradiction of his idea and the reality, his attempt to reconcile the difference between his ideal freedom and the reality of the world became the new driving force of his actions.

"If we kill all our enemies... over there...will we finally... be free?"



With the understanding of Eren's freedom, we can now grasp the exact meaning of his question and the importance of it.

He was not asking when the fighting would be over, but rather if the freedom he sought could be obtained if the outside world was wiped.

Eren could not accept that the world outside the walls was different than the ideal and free world that he had imagined. Simply experiencing the view of the ocean and leaving the walls was enough for Armin, where he was finally able to explore the world outside the walls. But Eren wanted more, he longed for something that cannot simply be put into action. Because of that discrepancy, he used the rumbling to destroy the world, he came to this conclusion not out of necessity but because he wanted to proceed with this, it was his primary motivation.

This revelation may seem like an outright retcon, however, when you explore deep into Eren's character you realize that this is the only place Eren's story could have gone from the very beginning. This desire was the only logical ending of his obsessive desire for freedom. Eren realized that he became the same as his enemies, he understood that he was now the villain of his own story.

Chapter 2: Free Will

Eren was someone who was a slave to his nature, he was never free to begin with. His character was created for people to understand the nature of murderers.

An excerpt from Isayama Hajime's 2017 interview about his inspiration for creating Attack on titan:

“When I read ‘Himanole’, I knew society would consider the serial killer in the story unforgivable under social norms. But when I took into account his life and background I still wondered, ‘If this was his nature, then who is it to blame...?’ I even thought, ‘is it merely coincidence that I wasn’t born as a murderer?’ We justify what we absolutely cannot accomplish as ‘A flaw due to lack of effort’, but there is bitterness within that. On the other hand, for a perpetrator, having the mindset of ‘it’s not because I lack effort that I became like this is a form of solace.’ -Hajime Isayama

Why does anyone act the way that they do?

Our actions and behavior are a result of the life experiences we’ve had that have shaped our personalities and opinions. People would disagree with this and say that the way we act is due to our nature and that people are born either good or evil.

But I believe it’s a combination of both, being born good or evil is regardless of the personality and person. If

you're born with an evil nature, only the way you grow up, the experience of the world around you will hinder or intensify this nature and put it into action.

Everyone is born with the ability to think, but only education and the experience of values and morality determine the way you think. Many are born with the nature of being evil or the desire to destroy, and this can be seen in infants and the way they play. But it's truly up to the way they're raised that they will change the way they put their nature into action.

After all, a match is made to light fire but only does an external factor lead it to light a fire. A match is considered dangerous as though it is the cause of fires going out of control, but only does a person use that match and light it to use it dangerously.

Everyone is born with the possibility, some more than others, to kill. But only those affected by external factors truly become killers.

Regardless of where their personality came from, most people act within their morals, beliefs, goals, and dreams. But...

Does that mean that no one is truly free?

That we can't act outside of our goals, morals, and beliefs?

Does this also mean that we shouldn't hold ourselves at fault for our character flaws?

Nevertheless, it is ridiculous to say that we cannot be held accountable for our actions, as they are essentially an act of our free will.

Nature versus nurture, the difference between the Jaeger brothers.

Eren is a unique case of someone whose ideology and dreams were formed by his uninfluenced nature the moment he was born. While his brother Zeke is the opposite, his ideology, dreams, and beliefs were shaped by the environment around him and the influence of his parents on him. Eren's nature drove him to be the person he is now, and no environmental factors played an effect on who he was, instead, the environment around him assisted his nature and personality. In contrast to that, Zeke grew up in an environment where his parents forced their ideologies and beliefs onto him. Urging his personality to shape in such a way that pleases the community around him. Zeke always believed that Eren was 'brainwashed' by their father just as he was. But upon learning Eren's lifestyle, he realized that nothing had influenced or urged Eren to be such a person.

But with Eren's nature, how does nurture also play a role in the person he is now?

Only the nurture around him is what truly develops his nature.

What if Eren developed as a person in a different environment?

Thus, we can use the alternate universe manga created by Isayama Hajime 'Attack on school cast 'as a comparison.

In an interview, Isayama stated that although this is an alternate universe, he wanted to create something that is linked to the original universe. He approached writing these characters in the same way when creating attack on titan. He creates Eren with the same personality and nature but changes the environment around him.

Eren remains the same person but in this alternate universe, he lives in a world not restricted by walls and he has never had to fight for freedom. He was living a boring life and longed for anything interesting to happen.

His nature becomes clear once he has a dream that a zombie apocalypse occurs, and ever since then he realized that he isn't able to stand living a boring life. He then starts to reflect on the dream and realizes that if the danger doesn't exist, he can just cause one himself. But of course, due to the environment of this alternate universe, Eren does not actually do anything to threaten humanity.

But we can still see that no matter the time or place, as long as he isn't free, Eren would always long for freedom. Eren would be immeasurably bored with the world if he didn't have the need to long for freedom.

This leads to boredom that would cause him to long for a world without freedom just so that he has an excuse to fight for freedom. Eren's nature would go as far as

wanting to destroy the free world just to create one where he could fight for freedom.

This was his nature, no matter the circumstances he would remain the same person. But also due to the circumstances, although he has the same personality and nature, his actions change due to the social norms around him.

No one truly changes, they remain the same person throughout their whole life. Everyone is the same version of themselves as children. What actually changes is the perspective of the outside world and how the close people view them.

This can be observed when reflecting and analyzing Eren's character. We can see that the current Eren is the same as his character in the past. But with the new perspective of the characters in season 4 that are ultimately the 'antagonists'; we see that this opposite side of the conflict being revealed exposes Eren's terrifying reality of his inhuman drive for freedom. We think that Eren changed as a character when he has been the same for many years, it's only due to the fact that we chose to ignore this that many people do not come to a full understanding of who Eren is. His friends didn't want to notice his true nature, and neither did we as viewers. We viewed Eren as being the protagonist who was on our side, when in reality, he was the antagonist of his own story.

He becomes a character that opposes the message of the book, where he represents the opposite of everything we had learned up to that point.

Chapter 3: The concept of the dream

Everyone is a slave to a dream that gives them the strength to keep pushing on, we're all drunk on a goal. Soon, we become captors of our dreams, driven by a sense of determination we are unable to let go of the goal. Freedom is attained by people who are able to let go of their dream, only then are they inevitably, truly, free.

In contrast to that, Eren was a character that was driven and controlled by his dream. He lacked the strength to let go of the dream and was consumed by it, losing his sense of identity. But how is his determination influenced by the way the show was written?

Attack on Titan takes place in a deterministic universe. Philosophy of determinism: All events in the universe are determined by preexisting causes, this is including moral choices. There's a cause-and-effect relation between all events in the universe. It's also a philosophy in the belief that human free will doesn't actually exist. Destiny and death are inevitable for all because it is a product of current actions, no matter what, everything will lead to a person's doom. Even if the future isn't seen, doesn't mean that there any many different outcomes, no matter what, there is only one possible future. Any decisions people make are the ones that lead to a predetermined future.

If someone witnesses the future in a deterministic universe, their illusion of free will is broken.

Eren is an example of this; he witnessed the future that will be a result of his own choices, what he saw is what he will do in the future, no matter what. Had he not witnessed the future, it would have seemed to him as if he had the free will in his decisions. But now that he had seen the future he knew what he would choose to do, and the path that was written for him.

After seeing the future, regardless of this being what he wanted, he became aware that he never had the free will in what choice to make. He follows his vision step by step, unable to overwrite his future.

This leads to a subsection of Newcomb's paradox related to free will, or more specifically, retrocausality. Retrocausality can occur in a world with people who have seen the future and can make predictions with 100% accuracy. When a person truly knows the future, it affects their knowledge, and that affects their actions. This leads to events in the future causing effects in the past. The chooser's choice will have already caused the predictor's actions. It was concluded that, if perfect predictors exist, there will be no free will, and people will do whatever they're fated to do.

Eren, knowing what he would do in the future, doesn't end up mattering to him during his actions post-time skip. What he sees in the future is exactly what he would do even if he hadn't seen it, because this future is based

on himself. He is “pushed by himself” and keeps moving forward because that future is what he wants and what he would do. He shows resolute determination in all of his actions because all the steps that he saw in front of him are the ones he would take.

But isn't this future something his own persona created?

Did he forge the future or was the future the one that forged his rage?

Both?

It doesn't matter, he doesn't know.

Eren's future memories are a philosophical commentary on the nature of free will.

The universe of attack on titan also operates on the theory of compatibilism. The belief is that, while the universe may be deterministic, we are still morally responsible for the actions we take.

Eren was drunk on his dream for freedom and by the end of his character arc, he had come to understand that this desire had enslaved him.

But returning to what we can learn of Eren's mindset and deeper traits that exist alongside the bristlier ones. Eren's friendship with Armin is another area where we

can see some of the subtler facets of young Jaeger. These two boys share a common bond in this curiosity they have and the drive to explore the outside world. It was Armin who opened Eren's eyes and made him realize there was something more he could have in life beyond simply staring up at the birds and vaguely dreaming of soaring with them

(I kind of wonder at this point whether Armin feels any regret over that because he ended up unleashing something very few of us would've guessed. This will become vastly evident going forward....).

But returning to their relationship, we also see plenty of contrast to them. Eren is nothing if not a fighter, while Armin is averse to conflict and in particular violence. His approach to dealing with fights is to endure. Essentially, Armin has grit, but does not growl.

Passivity, pacifism...none of those mesh with Eren.

Yet when Armin explains his philosophy—that if he stands his ground and doesn't give up, then it's not a loss—Eren is intrigued and receptive. That doesn't mean that he begins following Armin's practices himself. But the two become friends—not a minor thing with Eren's somewhat standoffish tendencies—and by the time Eren's Titan powers are revealed and our core trio find themselves surrounded and under threat from the Garrison Regiment, we find out that Eren and Mikasa have long-held Armin in high regard and trusted his insight. And despite the occasional venting, Eren admires Armin's brand of courage and strength and

does not consider him to be weak or a coward. And he trusts in and defers Armin's judgment.

I think it's arguable that people don't fully appreciate how significant this fact is. Adults don't always show good judgment in accepting good counsel and knowing whose advice they can trust. It can be especially touchy if ego gets involved, which seems to be a particularly common factor when it comes to interactions between males, though it absolutely can and does happen with other setups.

Additionally, Eren is a particularly hot-headed young man who definitely has some brash, impulsive aspects to his personality. I think there may also be a sense in which Eren has a leaning more towards following his instinctual and intuitive sides versus his intellectual, though he certainly has and makes use of both. So for him to be able to put those things aside and count on and trust Armin's judgment also speaks to something about Eren himself.

Even though Eren and Armin became great childhood friends because they shared the dream for "the world outside the walls," we established that the root of that dream has some slight differences. Armin possessed a curiosity for knowledge, and held onto the thought of "I want to see the sea." On the other hand, Eren viewed it as, "The sea exists, but we don't have the freedom to see it" - and he felt indignation towards that. He was not interested in the sea itself.

Other than this, throughout the entire story, all the situations Eren became involved with continue to change, and his grasp of the sea itself subsequently fades. The gradual clarity of how the two of them have diverged in perspective, and Armin's shock towards this realization. When they reached the sea, the shell Armin held symbolized "something that only exists in the sea." He tells Eren, "Look at this." However, Eren does not glance towards it as he was focused on more serious thoughts. "The shell that was ignored" was then forsaken within Armin's hand. This could be "the end of a dream" though maybe even more so "the end of adolescence."

Eren had to sacrifice every bit of his own humanity and personality to free Ymir and end the cycle of hatred. In a story that prides itself on existentialism over nihilism and the idea of "the world is cruel... but it's also beautiful", I don't think the main character would be given such a tragic end. He had to sacrifice everything, so he would essentially have to gain even more.

Even after understanding the psychology of the character, I can understand why Eren did what he did, why he destroyed the world to achieve his 4 goals;

Experience his freedom

Give his friends long lives

End the curse of the titans

Make his friends into heroes

But with this understanding, are Eren's actions considered justified?

Eren's actions cannot and will not be justified, he was willing to make all these decisions that led to the murder of many people living in that universe.

This links to serial killers in our universe, and the fact that all serial killers get their consequences no matter what. Even after understanding that they are going through severe mental illness and past trauma, their actions are not justified. They will only get the understanding and empathy of those around them but will continue to face consequences because regardless of all the hardships, they are still morally responsible for the actions they take. This entire story, characteristics, and development can be linked to those of our world.

After all, Attack on titan is nothing more than a metaphor for our world, symbolizing many touching themes. Childhood innocence, coming of age, dreams, war, conflict, the cycle of violent hatred, etc.

But, when taking under consideration the school alternate universe that Isayama wrote, and how the experience and outside world of attack on titan influenced Eren to become a murderer. What would living as a person with different circumstances, ones that are realistic and similar to ours, change Eren's nature and hunger for freedom in a way where he does not kill anyone?

If Eren were the same person living in our universe, how would therapy drive away his violent thoughts and longing for freedom?

Would therapy truly be able to suppress his thoughts that derive from his nature?

Chapter 4: Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

CBT is a class of therapeutic interventions based on a common theory about the connection between our thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs — cognitions — and our behavior. The core premise of CBT is simple: The way we think about situations shapes our choices, behavior, and actions.

If flawed or maladaptive thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs lead to destructive behavior, then changing those thoughts, attitudes and beliefs can lead to better, pro-social behaviors. That is the therapeutic promise of CBT. CBT focuses on providing, through individual or group therapy, the means to correct flawed cognitive-behavior processes. A key goal of CBT is to help people make better behavioral choices by understanding the way they think. Once people become more cognitively self-aware, CBT theorists argue, they can learn strategies to help them refrain from problematic behavior and make wiser behavioral decisions.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy is aimed to reduce recidivism. The therapy assumes that most people can become conscious of their thoughts and behaviors and then make positive changes to them. A person's thoughts are often the result of experience, and behavior is often influenced and prompted by these thoughts. In addition, thoughts may sometimes become distorted and fail to reflect reality accurately. Eren's journey is completely understandable when considering what he's

been through. The teen years are already notoriously volatile, and he's a trauma survivor, several times over. We see adults freak out in this series as well. Funnily enough, Eren's main problem when it comes to fear is that he probably lacks a sufficient dose of it.

You might label younger Eren as "edgy," but the boy has ample reason to be that way and to be as emotional and volatile as he is. This child has personally been through enough trauma and tragedy for several lifetimes before he's even 18. He also ends up at least partially experiencing other people's trauma and anguish via the memories filtering into his mind, as we've seen showcased a little already in the anime, especially towards the end of Season 3. He's not only figuratively but also literally experienced several lifetimes 'worth of trauma.

If Eren goes through CBT, many of his traumas might be suppressed and forgotten. But I would say that logically this therapy would not work on him as the person he is at the end of his arc. Instead, I would have suggested that Eren would be able to heal almost completely if he underwent this treatment before his time-skip, around the time when he faces trauma memories in season 3.

CBT is based on the idea that how we think (cognition), how we feel (emotion) and how we act (behavior) all interact together. Specifically, our thoughts determine our feelings and our behavior.

If 15-year-old Eren goes through this therapy, his

negative and unrealistic thoughts which cause distress and result in problems would be eased off of his mind. With this psychological distress, how he interprets situations becomes skewed, which in turn harms the actions he takes later on.

However, this is why I believe that as Eren ages beyond that point, his psychological distress causes his interpretations of how to save the land to become skewed. Once he reaches the age of 17, he becomes a character that ceases to contemplate life's worth and tragedy. He begins to sacrifice himself and many others to achieve full freedom for his dear friends. The reason why I believe his character is beyond CBT revival is that after going through all this trauma, he has finally accepted his path in life. He is no longer a sensitive person that can be easily swayed by logic, he has set his mind to his planned actions and has developed his mind completely.

Nevertheless, there is always a chance to try and save a soul. The fragile souls who have experienced trauma should be given a second chance. We can help people find new ways to behave by changing their thought patterns, reducing stress, coping with complicated relationships, dealing with grief, and facing many other common life challenges.

Eren was not evil, but simply devoted and selfless, securing freedom for his loved ones.

Finally, a poem, to the rumbling and to the boy who sought freedom

*As the storm rages on,
The city comes alive,
Raising their weapons
The fight for freedom carries on*

*A tyrant enthroned at its peak,
Scowling at its denizens.
With a meaty pointer,
He shouts out an order
Calling for their heads.*

*The soldiers charge in loyalty
As the masses jeer in a frenzy.
The wind cries in sorrow,
As its people bathe in its blood.
The thunder crackles
As its war continues,
The rumbling ground
Now sings its tune.*

*A coup is formed
In fear and disbelief,
Their eyes filled with tears
To the sins they commit.*

*The battle is over, the war won,
At a cost of a leader
That sings no song,
The ground left still
Waiting for its savior.*

*The people mourn in tune,
Their song laid across the wind
For their future is set
Laid in freedom and choice.*

*Upon the skies, in flight nearby
To the boy who sought freedom... Goodbye*

