

A GUIDE TO

Night

Elie Wiesel

The days were like nights, and the nights left the dregs of their darkness in our souls.

THE NARRATIVE AT A GLANCE

Night is an autobiographical narrative covering three and a half years in Elie Wiesel's life, from late 1941 to 1945, during World War II. The power of the author's unadorned **style** and his stark **imagery** and **symbolism** contribute to the memoir's effectiveness as a portrait of the evil of the Holocaust.

Settings: Hungary, Poland, and Germany, 1941 to 1945.

Central Character: Elie Wiesel, deported to Auschwitz in 1944 and soon separated from his mother and sisters. The narrative traces the struggle of Wiesel and his father to survive the brutality and dehumanization of life as prisoners of the Nazis.

Conflicts: **External conflicts** between Jews and their Nazi oppressors; between Jews and the harsh winter climate; among Jews about how to respond to brutality and terror. **Internal conflicts** in the narrator's mind about his response to the dehumanization at the hands of the Nazis (including his loss of religious faith) and about how he should behave toward his father.

Resolution: Wiesel's father dies in Buchenwald extermination camp. Wiesel himself is liberated in April 1945 by the victorious Allies, but his experiences leave him permanently altered.

Themes: Human beings need illusions in order to combat despair; the depths of human evil challenge faith in God; captivity and torture dehumanize captors and victims alike; concentration-camp existence inspires both savagery and nobility of spirit.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The narrative should pose no comprehension problems to upper-grade students. However, explicit cruelty, violence, abusive language, or sexual situations may trouble some readers. These features result from Wiesel's realistic depiction of the appalling conditions of life as captives of the Nazis. The author's purpose is to bear personal witness to the unspeakable horrors of

genocide, but he also records many examples of courage, nobility, and sacrifice.

BACKGROUND

The Holocaust. In biblical times a holocaust was a sacrificial animal completely consumed by fire. "The Holocaust" now denotes the systematic genocide of approximately six million Jews by the German Nazi regime during World War II. The Nazis deprived Jews of their civil rights, confined them to ghettos, and finally deported them to concentration camps, where those who did not die of brutality and starvation were executed by firing squads or in gas chambers. The most horrible camps included **Auschwitz** in southern Poland and **Buchenwald** in central Germany. Groups instrumental in carrying out Nazi policy included the **Gestapo**, or secret police, and the **SS**, or *Schutzstaffel*, a special force notorious for its brutal concentration-camp guards. Prisoners who cooperated with the SS in disciplining their fellow prisoners were called *Kapos*.

Hasidic Judaism. Hasidism is a Jewish religious movement started in eastern Europe in the eighteenth century. Hasidism is composed of many groups, usually headed by a charismatic leader. A Hasid (plural, *Hasidim*) often devotes his life to study of the Jewish scriptures, the Talmud, or the cabbala (Kabbalah). Among the **Jewish scriptures**, Wiesel cites the Book of Job, a poetic work in which God allows Job to be visited by all sorts of undeserved evils. Job challenges God to grant him justice, but God never directly answers Job's plea. The **Talmud** is a compilation of Jewish oral law accompanied by a vast literature of rabbinic commentary. The **cabbala** is a Jewish system of mysticism that arose from medieval interpretations of the Jewish scriptures. Hasidism also stresses joyful performance of duties like reciting the **Kaddish**, an ancient prayer for the dead in the Aramaic language, which requires a quorum of ten adult Jews for proper recitation. Wiesel quotes its opening words, "*Yitgadal veyitkadach shmé raba*" ("May His Name be blessed and magnified.")

Jewish Feasts. The narrative speaks of the fall feasts of **Rosh Hashana** (New Year) and **Yom Kippur** (Day of Atonement); these holidays are called the Days of Awe

or the High Holy Days. The feasts encourage reassessment of one's life and deeds, and Jewish tradition teaches that on these days God decides who will live and die during the coming year. In ordinary life the Days of Awe promote spiritual renewal and reconciliation with others. In the concentration camp they ironically reinforce Elie Wiesel's loss of faith.

MAIN INDIVIDUALS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Eliezer (Elie) Wiesel, the narrator, twelve when the book opens in 1941; deported in the spring of 1944 to Auschwitz, where he and his father are separated from his mother and sisters. Elie had been drawn to Jewish mysticism, but the horrors of life under the Nazis weaken his faith.

Moshe the Beadle, a poor "man of all work" in the Hasidic synagogue of Sighet; Wiesel's instructor in Jewish mystical lore; survivor of an early deportation whose story is not believed.

Chlomo Wiesel, Wiesel's father, a shopkeeper of Sighet who suffers through nearly a year of nightmarish captivity in Nazi concentration camps before dying in Buchenwald in January 1945.

Mrs. Wiesel, Hilda, Béa, and Tzipora, Wiesel's mother, two older sisters, and baby sister. Elie does not learn until after the war that only Hilda and Béa survived.

Stein of Antwerp, a distant relative of the Wiesels, whom Wiesel and his father encounter at Auschwitz.

Akiba Drumer, a camp inmate; a mystic who believes that God must be testing the Jews through the Holocaust; he loses his faith just before he is killed.

Juliek, Polish violinist whom Wiesel meets at Buna; he dies during the forced evacuation to Buchenwald.

Yossi and Tibi, young Czech brothers who become Wiesel's friends at Buna.

Rabbi Eliahou, a well-loved prisoner whose son abandons him during a forced march in winter.

CONTENTS

The narrative is divided into nine untitled and unnumbered sections.

First Section. The opening section of *Night* provides **exposition**, and sketches the principal **external conflict** of the work, which is told from the first-person **point of view**. In the town of Sighet in Transylvania (then in Hungary, now in Romania), twelve-year-old Eliezer Wiesel, a shopkeeper's son, is drawn to study the cabbala with Moshe the Beadle. One day, however, Moshe and all other foreign Jews are expelled from Sighet. Several months later Moshe returns with a tale of horror: The deportees were forced to dig their own common grave, then shot in a mass execution. He

escaped with a leg wound by playing dead. While there is still time to leave and perhaps escape the Nazis, the Jews of Sighet choose not to believe his story.

Over the next three years various reports **foreshadow** the catastrophe to come. But the people cherish the illusion that normal life will continue. Everything changes in the spring of 1944, when the German army arrives in Sighet and begins to curtail the civil rights of Jews. Leaders are arrested, valuables are confiscated, and all Jews are forced to wear a yellow star and live in one of two ghettos. One night Wiesel's father returns from a special meeting of the Jewish Council with the shocking news that all Jews are to be deported to an unknown destination. The process takes several days. Finally, as two Gestapo officers watch with smug satisfaction, Wiesel's family joins the last Jews to leave Sighet, packed eighty to a car in a railroad train.

Second Section. The section describes the train journey and arrival at Auschwitz. With grim **irony**, Wiesel contrasts the blossoming spring landscape outside the train with conditions inside. After two days the prisoners are tortured by hunger, thirst, and mental anguish. Madame Schächter, a woman separated from her husband and two older sons, begins to experience nightmarish visions. She cries out warnings about the huge flames of a fiery furnace. Her screams so unnerve her fellow prisoners that they gag her and beat her. The episode **foreshadows** the cremation furnaces to come and begins to develop the **theme** of the captives' dehumanization. When the train arrives at Auschwitz, the prisoners at first cling to the illusion that prison life will be tolerable. However, that very night they see flames gushing out of a tall chimney and smell burning flesh. They realize that Auschwitz is an extermination center.

Third Section. Men and women are separated, and Wiesel catches a glimpse of his mother and sisters disappearing into the crowd. He is never to see his mother or youngest sister again. Over the next three weeks, Wiesel and his father discover the cruel realities of life as prisoners of the Nazis. They try to remain together and to survive. Acting on a tip from a fellow prisoner, Elie lies about his age, and both he and his father survive their first "selection" by Dr. Mengele—a process in which weak or sick persons are condemned for slaughter. As they pass ditches where babies are burning, the father's voice chokes as he asserts that "humanity" is not concerned with the Jews. Revolt against God rises within Wiesel when his father and others begin to recite the Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead. He wonders, How can God permit such barbarity?

Dehumanizing conditions mark barracks life. The prisoners' heads and bodies are completely shaved; they are disinfected with petrol and issued ill-fitting uniforms; they are beaten by the Kapos on the slightest pretext. An SS officer warns them that if they do not work, they will be sent to the crematory. When another prisoner deals Wiesel's father such a violent blow that

he falls to the ground, the son suffers a wrenching **internal conflict**. Only yesterday he would have defended his father against such an attack; now he passively focuses on his own survival.

The prisoners' morale improves somewhat after a young Polish Kapo urges them not to lose faith or courage. The captives' left arms, however, are then tattooed with numbers that replace their names. The numbers are **emblems** of their dehumanization. In another episode, Stein, a distant relative of the Wiesels' from Antwerp, Belgium, seeks news of his wife and children. Pitying him, Elie lies: He says his mother has heard that Stein's family is all right. This **theme** of deception and illusion as a defense against despair emerges again toward the end of the section. Akiba Drumer, a Hasid, expounds the theory that a loving God is merely testing His people. Wiesel and his father reassure each other that Elie's mother and sisters are alive in a labor camp. After three weeks in Auschwitz, father and son are sent to a new camp, Buna.

Fourth Section. A fellow inmate at Buna tries to extort Wiesel's shoes in exchange for a favorable work assignment. Elie resists, but later his shoes are confiscated anyway. His new comrades include a group of Jewish musicians who are not allowed to play German music. Juliek, a Polish violinist, explains that Idek the Kapo suffers from a streak of madness and that it is best to keep out of his way. Wiesel and his father are sent to work in a warehouse for electrical equipment. Elie becomes friends with Yossi and Tibi, Czech brothers whose parents have been killed. The three talk of Palestine.

Various incidents interrupt the monotony of camp life. Elie manages to save his gold crown from a malicious dentist who sells gold on the black market. A French girl who works next to him at the warehouse consoles him after Idek beats him with his fists. (In a **flash-forward**, Wiesel recalls meeting her many years later in the Paris Metro.) In a frenzy, Idek beats Wiesel's father with an iron bar, calling him a lazy old devil. Wiesel again upbraids himself for failing to rise to his father's defense. Franek the foreman soon succeeds in extorting Wiesel's gold crown from him.

When the Allies bomb the area, the inmates do not fear the bombs. Instead, their hopes are raised for liberation, even for revenge. A young Polish prisoner is hanged a week later for stealing during the air raid. The whole camp is marched past the hanged man. Another public hanging, that of a young boy, is botched, and he struggles for more than half an hour. Forced to witness this horror, one inmate asks, "Where is God now?" Wiesel feels that God Himself hangs on the gallows.

Fifth Section. Summer 1944 fades, and the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashana, arrives. The **theme** of destruction of faith continues to be developed as Wiesel wonders how he can bless the name of God. On Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, Elie feels there is no reason to observe the traditions of the holy day.

The author effectively employs **suspense** as he tells how he and his comrades struggle to survive the next selection. Both Wiesel and his father pass, but the father is then ordered to remain in camp on the day of execution. In a frantic farewell the father gives his son a knife and a spoon, and Elie reflects on how pathetic this "inheritance" is. At the end of the day, Wiesel discovers that his father has won a reprieve by proving he can still work. Akiba Drumer was not so lucky. The erstwhile mystic lost his faith and thereby his ability to resist the Nazi executioner.

During the winter, as the prisoners struggle to survive the cold, Wiesel's right foot begins to swell. He is taken to the camp hospital, and his sole is surgically opened to drain the pus. Being hospitalized terrifies him; he fears he will fail the next selection. A new problem arises when Russian troops press westward into Poland. Despite his unhealed foot, Elie joins his father and other inmates being evacuated to Germany by the retreating Nazis. They march out of camp during a heavy snowstorm. (He and his father could have stayed behind in the camp hospital but feared the Germans would blow it up. After the war, Wiesel learned that the undamaged hospital had been liberated by the Russians two days after the evacuation.)

Sixth Section. The author describes the ghastly march from Buna to Gleiwitz. The weak fall and die in the wayside snowdrifts; some prisoners are trampled to death. Wiesel feels the fascinating attraction of death as a relief from physical agony and exhaustion. When the kindly Rabbi Eliahou asks for news of his son, Elie recalls with a shudder that he saw the son deliberately running ahead during the day's march, hoping to be rid of the ailing rabbi, "an encumbrance which could lessen his own chances of survival." He prays for the strength never to abandon his own father.

On arrival at Gleiwitz the prisoners are crammed into a barracks so crowded they must struggle for air. Wiesel recognizes the voice of Juliek, the violinist he met at Buna. In the darkness, Wiesel believes he hears Juliek sweetly play a fragment of a Beethoven violin concerto for this audience of the dead and dying. In the morning, Juliek is dead and his violin lies nearby, crushed. After three days without food or drink, the Wiesels narrowly survive yet another selection. Then they are loaded onto a train for Buchenwald.

Seventh Section. Wiesel describes another grim journey. For ten days the prisoners are given no food. Corpses are thrown into fields alongside the railroad tracks. The inmates' hunger reduces them to beasts; a son strangles his own father for a morsel of bread. Wails of despair rend the air. When the train arrives at Buchenwald, only twelve out of the original one hundred prisoners in Wiesel's car are able to leave alive. The fortunate few include Wiesel and his father.

Eighth Section. In this **climactic** section, Chlomo Wiesel dies less than three months before the Allies

liberate Buchenwald. Wiesel's **internal conflicts** intensify as he sees his father wracked by dysentery and despair. Despite the guilt he feels over his own anger toward his father, Elie stays near him almost to the end. His death hastened by a blow to the head by an SS officer, the father—probably still alive—is taken away while his son sleeps through the night. In the morning, Wiesel remembers, “I did not weep, and it pained me that I could not weep. But I had no more tears.”

Ninth Section. Buchenwald is liberated by the Allies in April 1945. The inmates are ravenous with hunger. Ironically, three days after he is freed, Elie suffers a serious case of food poisoning. After two weeks in a hospital, hovering between life and death, he looks into a mirror for the first time since deportation from Sighet. The final sentences of *Night* create a powerful **image**:

From the depths of the mirror, a corpse gazed back at me.

The look in his eyes, as they stared into mine, has never left me.

APPROACHES FOR POST-READING ACTIVITIES

Discussion groups or individual students might focus on the following activities.

1. Researching the Life of Elie Wiesel

Night ends in 1945, but Wiesel led a productive and highly interesting life in the decades that followed. Students might read a short biography of Wiesel (in *Contemporary Authors*, for instance) or look at some of his other writing (notably *Dawn* and *The Accident*, the two other volumes of *The Night Trilogy*). Then have them consider

- how Wiesel's experiences as a captive of the Nazis have affected his later personal and public life
- in what ways he has tried to foster world peace and prevent a recurrence of Nazilike brutality

2. Investigating Literature of the Holocaust

Students might select and report on other works that deal with the Holocaust, such as Art Spiegelman's two-part graphic novel *Maus*, composed with grim irony; Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*; Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl*; or the poems of Nelly Sachs, a winner of the Nobel Prize in literature.

3. Analyzing German History After 1945

After World War II, both the victorious Allies and the Germans themselves sought to lay the ground-

work for preventing a Nazilike racist regime from establishing itself again in Germany. Students might do research on the following and report to small discussion groups or the entire class:

- The Nürnberg (or Nuremberg) Trials of 1945–1946, in which Nazi leaders were tried as war criminals by an international tribunal.
- The steps taken by the Federal Republic of Germany to prevent a recurrence of Nazism. Students could research the laws of postwar Germany and the conduct of the German media.
- The role of Jews in postwar Germany. How many live in the country? What is their relationship to other Germans?

MEET THE WRITER

Elie Wiesel (1928–) was born in Sighet, Romania, and grew up in a community of Hasidic Jews. In 1944, he and his family were deported to Auschwitz in Poland. After World War II, Wiesel lived and worked as a journalist in Paris and later settled in the United States. *Night*, the stark record of his Holocaust experiences, first appeared in French in 1958. Wiesel's efforts to keep the memory of the Holocaust alive in order to help prevent such atrocities in the future earned him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986. Such efforts have permeated his career as a novelist, a journalist, and, for many years, a professor at Boston University.

READ ON

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*. A classic exploration of the nature of evil, cast as an adventure narrative in nineteenth-century Africa.

Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl*. A Jewish girl's account of her family's concealment from the Nazis in Amsterdam, reissued in an expanded, definitive edition in 1995. It has been adapted for both stage and screen as *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

Mark Helprin, “Tamar.” A poignant short story about a young Jewish man in London on the eve of World War II and the Holocaust.

Thomas Keneally, *Schindler's List*. The true story of a German businessman whose courage and resourcefulness saved many Jewish lives; adapted for the screen in 1993.

Jeshajahu Weinberg and Rina Elieli, *The Holocaust Museum in Washington*. The story of the museum's construction, with illustrations of exhibits.

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