

LESSON: Exploring *Night* as Literature: Bearing Witness to History

GRADE LEVEL: Secondary Level

SUBJECT: Multidisciplinary

TIME REQUIRED: This lesson is highly adaptable. Teachers can choose to use all or sections of the 3-part lesson, depending on the context in which the students read *Night*, and the desired outcomes in the classroom. At minimum, teachers should prepare for at least one classroom session per segment of the lesson you wish to include (three in total).

This is a *thematic* lesson that builds on fundamental knowledge and provides in-depth exploration of a topic.

RATIONALE

Elie Wiesel's memoir, *Night*, has become a standard text used in many classes to both teach about the history and human impact of the Holocaust. This lesson will help teachers and students understand the fuller historical context of the events described in Wiesel's writing.

In addition, students will examine the purpose of a memoir and concept of bearing witness while examining *Night* for both its historical and literary contexts. Finally, unique resources allow students to learn about the later life and legacy of Elie Wiesel.

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- How were Elie Wiesel's Holocaust experiences shaped by his own individual circumstances (his age, where he lived, his family)? How did events of World War II impact what happened to him and his family?
- What is the purpose of memoir?
- What reasons did Elie Wiesel give for writing this memoir?
- How is Elie Wiesel changed by the Holocaust experiences he describes in *Night* (change over time)?
- How does Elie Wiesel use the dynamic character technique as a writer to convey his real life experiences during the Holocaust?
- How did Elie Wiesel's work after the Holocaust reflect his experiences in the Holocaust and his desire to act as a witness?

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EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

At the end of this lesson, students will:

- Have a nuanced understanding of the life of Elie Wiesel and the events that affected him and his family.
- Explore how Elie Wiesel conveys his purpose for writing *Night* and the changes he undergoes over the course of the memoir.
- Consider how Elie Wiesel’s experiences during the Holocaust shaped his post-liberation life and work.

TEACHER PREPARATION

- Read *Night*
- Read USHMM Holocaust Encyclopedia articles “[Elie Wiesel](#)” and “[Sighet](#)”
- Read NY Times article, [The Story of Night](#)
- Watch series of five short videos (approx. 2 minutes each), [The Many Legacies of Elie Wiesel](#)
- Review concept of dialectical journal [A double-entry journal (either physical or digital) or a reader-response journal that records a dialogue, or conversation, between the ideas in the text (the words being read) and the ideas of the reader (the person who is doing the reading)]

MATERIALS

- Copies of *Night* (recommended version: Wiesel, Elie. *Night*. New York: Hill And Wang, 2006.)
- Printed or digital sharing of [Elie Wiesel timeline](#) cards
- A method for students to record reflections (paper journals or online program) (for Part II)
- Printed or digital copies of [Wiesel speech excerpts](#) (for Part III)

MODIFICATIONS

This lesson is intentionally flexible, recognizing that *Night* is taught in many settings with various educational goals. Teachers may choose to use all or parts of this lesson, and can modify it as desired.

MODIFICATIONS FOR ONLINE INSTRUCTION

- Provide an appropriate forum for online discussion feedback.
- Allow students to work on shared documents or meet in virtual break out rooms.
- Use of a virtual whiteboard to share and map ideas.
- An online discussion or presentation can be used to share discussion answers.

LEARNER VARIABILITY MODIFICATIONS

- Preview and post key definitions
- Class activities can be modified for group or individual instruction
- Any writing tasks can be done individually, in mentor pairings, or in groups

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INSTRUCTIONAL SEQUENCE

PART I: SETTING HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Essential Questions:

- How were Elie Wiesel's Holocaust experiences shaped by his own individual circumstances (his age, where he lived, his family)?
- How did events of World War II impact what happened to him and his family?

Teachers planning to use this lesson should complete steps 1 and 2 prior to the class reading *Night*. Step 3 should be completed as the class is reading; this step is also included (with additional questions) as a classroom activity option in Part II.

PRIOR TO READING *NIGHT*:

1. Definition of the Holocaust

Read the definition of the Holocaust to the class, defining terms and answering questions. (Teachers should use the [Holocaust Encyclopedia](#) to assist in answering more challenging questions.)

The Holocaust was the systematic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of 6 million Jews by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945. By the end of the war in 1945, the Germans and their collaborators killed nearly two out of every three European Jews. While Jews were the primary victims, German authorities also persecuted and killed other groups for their perceived racial or biological inferiority: Roma; people with disabilities; some of the Slavic peoples (especially Poles and Russians), and blacks. Other groups were persecuted on political, ideological or behavioral grounds, among them Communists, Socialists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and homosexuals.

2. Historical Context: Timeline Activity

- Pass out the first twenty-two timeline cards to the class (from September 30, 1928 “Elie Wiesel Born” to March 19, 1944 “Germany Occupies Hungary”).
- In chronological order, **have the students read the card to the class, then place it on the wall. If it is easier to have the cards on the wall prior to the beginning of class or you are under time constraints, have students read the cards as part of a gallery walk.** Leave these cards on the wall as reference throughout the unit. [Note: The Elie Wiesel timeline cards duplicate several cards from the [USHMM's main Timeline lesson](#). If teachers are already using this lesson, swap in the Elie Wiesel cards in place of the main cards for duplicated events/laws.]

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c. Discuss:

ASK THE STUDENTS

- What does this timeline reveal about the Holocaust? (sample answers: that it happened over a long period of time; that it began with laws and decrees; that mass murder began after the start of World War II; that Jews tried to fight back)
- How did geography and the events of World War II affect how Jews were impacted by the Holocaust? (sample answers: that Jews were persecuted once their countries were occupied by Nazi Germany; that as the war continued, Germany heightened the killing)
- What events in the timeline directly affected the Wiesel family? (sample answers: antisemitism in Romania; Sighet given to Hungary; the deportation of “foreign” Jews, German occupation of Hungary)

AS THE CLASS IS READING *NIGHT*

1. Adding Historical Context: Timeline Activity

a. Ask students to add the next set of timeline cards (April 18-20, 1944 “Sighet Ghettos Created” to May 7, 1945 “German Forces Surrender”) to the wall.

b. Assign small groups a timeline card related to the events in *Night* (any card between “Sighet Ghettos Created” and “Buchenwald Liberated”). **Do not assign the cards “D-Day, June 6, 1944” or “Auschwitz Report in U.S. Newspapers, November 26, 1944” as they are not mentioned in *Night*.**

c. Discuss as a whole group:

- **What does this timeline show us about how the Holocaust happened in Hungary?** (the persecution and deportation happened very quickly, it was close to the end of the war)

d. Ask students to work together and then present to the class:

- How does Elie Wiesel describe the event on students’ assigned timeline card in *Night*?
- What additional details and perspective does Elie Wiesel include in the book about the event(s) on the timeline card?

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e. Have a class discussion or have students reflect in writing:

- How does personal testimony enhance our understanding of historical events?
- What details does Wiesel provide that might not be included in history books?

PART II: ENGAGING WITH THE MEMOIR AS LITERARY TEXT

Essential Questions:

- What is the purpose of memoir?
- What reasons did Elie Wiesel give for writing this memoir?
- How is Elie Wiesel changed by the Holocaust experiences he describes in *Night* (change over time)?
- How does Elie Wiesel use the dynamic character technique as a writer to convey his real life experiences during the Holocaust?

Note: Teachers should feel free to adjust the individual components of this lesson, which includes an introduction, two options for student writing and reflection as they read, and optional classroom activities and discussion questions. Suggested discussion questions could also be used as journal or essay prompts.

Introduction:

1. Definitions

Prior to reading *Night*, define or review the following terms for the class:

- Dynamic Character:** a character that undergoes an important inner change over the course of a story; can be a fictional character or a real person who changes over the course of a literary work
- Memoir:** the word comes from the French for “memory,” a memoir is a written work about a period of the author’s life. It is like an autobiography, but often only covers a specific period of time, rather than the author’s entire life.

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3. Purpose of a Memoir

- a. Host a class discussion.

ASK THE STUDENTS

- What is the purpose of testimonies or memoirs? (a way that people can share their experiences and make sense of them; to convey their experiences to others)
- What kind of choices do people make when sharing their stories? (you can't share everything about what happens to you; people have to make decisions about how to describe conversations if they can't remember all the details; recognizing need to retain essence of a conversation)
- Why might a Holocaust survivor want to write a memoir? (to memorialize their family, to make sure it never happens again, to describe what happened to them, to provide a personal perspective on a historical event or time)

4. Dialectical Journal Prompts

Select one of the following two options for prompts for use in a dialectical journal as students read *Night*:

Option 1: What is the purpose of memoir? What reasons did Elie Wiesel give for writing this memoir?

- a. [Students will read the preface](#) of *Night* by Elie Wiesel. (To complete this part of the lesson sequence, the 2006 version of *Night* needs to be used.)
- b. Ask students in small groups or for a free-write response: What do you think Elie Wiesel is trying to convey to the reader in his preface? (reasons for writing the book, context for writing the book, his process of writing, his struggle to make sense of his experiences)

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- c. Highlight the following excerpts from the preface in which Wiesel reflects on the purpose of writing this memoir.

- “Did I write it so as not to go mad or, on the contrary, to go mad in order to understand the nature of madness, the immense, terrifying madness that had erupted in history and in the conscience of mankind?”
- “Or was it simply to preserve a record of the ordeal I endured as an adolescent, at an early age when one’s knowledge of death and evil should be limited to what one discovers in literature?”
- “However, having survived, I needed to give some meaning to my survival. Was it to protect that meaning that I set to paper an experience in which nothing made any sense?”
- “I only know that without this testimony, my life as a writer—or my life, period—would not have become what it is: that of a witness who believes he has a moral obligation to try to prevent the enemy from enjoying one last victory by allowing his crimes to be erased from human memory.”

- d. As students read *Night*, they should use their dialectical journals to record evidence which support the concepts/themes found in Wiesel’s preface questions. Students may also work in pairs or groups.
- e. Students should then write brief reflections in each entry on why they chose this evidence and how they think it supports or relates to Wiesel’s questions.
- f. Teachers can conduct ongoing assessments by having small groups discuss the evidence they’ve recorded or by collecting and reviewing these journals.
- g. Summative assessment: Have students return to the preface of *Night*, and review the questions Wiesel posed about his purpose in writing the memoir. Using evidence from *Night* and from their journals, students should assess:

Based on the evidence you have chosen, what seems to be the primary reason that Elie Wiesel wrote the memoir *Night*?

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Option 2: How is Elie Wiesel changed by the Holocaust experiences he describes in *Night* (change over time)? How does Elie Wiesel use the dynamic character technique as a writer to convey his real life experiences during the Holocaust?

- a. Introduce this quotation from Elie Wiesel to the students:

"All Was Lost, Yet Something Was Preserved," *New York Times Book Review*, 1984 August 19, section 7, page 15.

The Nazis' aim was to make the Jewish universe shrink - from town to neighborhood, from neighborhood to street, from street to house, from house to room, from room to garret, from garret to cattle car, from cattle car to gas chamber. And they did the same to the individual - separated from his or her community, then from his or her family, then from his or her identity, eventually becoming a work permit, then a number, until the number itself was turned into ashes.

Elie Wiesel

- b. As students read *Night*, they should continue to reflect on this quote and use their dialectical journals to record evidence they read related to how the Nazis force Wiesel's universe - both physical and individual - to shrink.
- c. They should then write brief reflections in the journal, answering the questions: How does Wiesel describe his response to those actions? How do these actions affect his inner thoughts and feelings?
- d. Summative assessment: Using evidence from *Night*, from the timeline activity, and from their journals, students should assess:

How does Elie Wiesel change over the course of the events described in *Night*? How does Elie Wiesel, the writer, convey his inner changes to the reader?

Some potential themes might be: relationship with God (loss or struggle with faith); father/son relationship; Elie's changing relationship with himself; survival and circumstance; human condition changed by external events

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5. Optional classroom activities while the students are reading *Night*

The first activity listed below is also included in Part I of this lesson (Setting Historical Context) with alternative questions.

1. Adding Historical Context: Timeline Activity

This activity is also included in Part I of this lesson (Setting Historical Context) with alternative questions.

- a. As students continue to read *Night*, add the timeline cards (April 18-20, 1944 “Sighet Ghettos Created” to May 7, 1945 “German Forces Surrender”) to the wall.
- b. Split students into small groups. Assign each group a timeline card related to the events in *Night* (any card between “Sighet Ghettos Created” and “Buchenwald Liberated”). Do not assign the cards “D-Day, June 6, 1944” or “Auschwitz Report in U.S. Newspapers, November 26, 1944” as they are not mentioned in *Night*.
- c. Ask students to work together and then present to the class:
 - How does Elie Wiesel describe this timeline card event in *Night*?
 - How does he remember and describe his feelings about the event?
 - Does he use any of the themes we discussed (or any new themes you have identified) in his description of this event?
- d. Have a class discussion:
 - How does personal testimony enhance our understanding of a historical event?

2. Class Discussion or Journal Prompts

As students continue to read, conduct ongoing class discussions or ask students to answer these questions in their journals:

- What themes have you identified in this book?
- How does Elie Wiesel use foreshadowing in *Night*?
- What early events signal that the experiences of the Jews of Sighet will be much worse than they think?
- How do relationships between and among the prisoners of the camps change over time?
- How does Wiesel describe the changes in his relationship with his father?
- How does the fact that *Night* is a memoir affect the story? What might Wiesel have included or excluded if *Night* was a diary written at the time?
- Why do you think Elie Wiesel’s memoir is titled *Night*?

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3. Viewing the Memoir as Literature

- a. After the class has finished reading *Night*, have the class read [The Story of Night](#) from the *New York Times* and watch the USHMM's special features on Elie Wiesel as [Literary Craftsman](#) and [Teacher](#) (two short films, approx. two minutes each). Citing examples from the above resources and their dialectical journals, the class will discuss or write about:

- Why has *Night* remained a powerful memoir and testimony on the Holocaust?
- How does the reading of testimony help us to understand the impact the Holocaust has on an individual?

Part III: Beyond the Memoir: The Act of Bearing Witness

Essential Question:

- How did Elie Wiesel's work after the Holocaust reflect his experiences in the Holocaust and his desire to act as a witness?

1. Adding Greater Context: Timeline Activity

- a. Finish placing the timeline cards (June 2, 1945 “Elie Wiesel sent to Children’s Homes” to July 2, 2016 “Elie Wiesel Dies”) on the wall. Either have students read the cards out loud, or read them as part of a gallery walk.
- b. Discuss: how did Elie Wiesel use his experiences to memorialize the Holocaust and to draw attention to the victims of other genocides?

2. Analyzing Elie Wiesel's speeches

- a. Hand out copies or distribute digital copies of [Elie Wiesel speech excerpts](#).
- b. Ask three students to each read one of the speeches out loud. While listening, students should underline sentences or phrases where they hear Wiesel discussing the idea of **being a witness** and the responsibilities of a witness.
- c. [Alternative: have students watch the five short videos [The Many Legacies of Elie Wiesel](#) and write down examples of Wiesel acting as a witness.]

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d. Ask students to share what they identified, and reflect on how Wiesel described the importance of witnessing.

e. Summative assessment: Based on the following prompt, have a class discussion, Socratic Seminar, or assign as an essay:

Using examples from *Night*, from Elie Wiesel's life (as displayed in the timeline cards), and from his speeches, what does Elie Wiesel feel are the responsibilities of bearing witness? How did he use his writing and his life to bear witness?