

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 was Elie Wiesel changed by the Holocaust experiences he describes in *Night* (change over time)?
- How does Elie Wiesel purposefully employ 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](#)"
- Watch [Bearing Witness: Elie Wiesel and Night](#) (8:04)
- 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)

LEARNER VARIABILITY MODIFICATIONS AND ACCOMMODATIONS

The lesson is intentionally flexible to allow for individual teacher modifications to achieve educational outcomes. Technology and teaching strategies are suggested in the instructional sequence; please use other options if they support the learning needs of your students. Consider utilizing graphic organizers, note-taking strategies, reading choices, and online engagement tools.

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.

Educators may choose to use learner variability modifications specific to this lesson:

- Teachers can provide students with choices as to how they access information throughout lessons, i.e. read print alone, read print with a partner, read along while the teacher reads aloud, etc.
- Define terms that would clarify understanding for students. Reference the [Glossary](#) in the *Holocaust Encyclopedia* for definitional support.
- Use online discussion or engagement tools that work best in your classroom, such as Padlet.

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- *Holocaust Encyclopedia* articles are available in various languages; refer to the word “Language” and select the Globe icon available on the lefthand side of the article.
- Closed captions are provided for videos.
- Incorporate strategies such as think-pair-share and jigsaw to enhance student engagement.
- Provide an audiobook of *Night* for students with reading difficulties.
- Any writing tasks can be done individually, in mentor pairings, or in groups; or use technology to support writing (i.e. voice to text)

This lesson is available as an [online, asynchronous experience for students](#), which can be accessed through a web browser or LMS files. The online lessons are accessible to all students for in-person and virtual learning, and they provide specific support for students using screen readers.

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 approximately six million European Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators in the years leading up to and during World War II. They believed that the Germans belonged to a race that was "superior" to all others and that the Jews belonged to a race that was "inferior," who threatened the so-called German racial community. During the era of the Holocaust (1933-1945), German authorities also targeted other groups because of their perceived "racial inferiority": Roma, people with disabilities, some of the Slavic peoples (Poles, Russians,

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and others), and Black people . Other groups were persecuted on political, ideological, and behavioral grounds, among them Communists, Socialists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, men who were accused of “homosexuality,” and people whom the regime identified as “asocials” and “professional criminals.”

2. Historical Context: Timeline Activity

- a. Distribute the first twenty-two timeline cards to the students (from September 30, 1928 “Elie Wiesel Born” to March 19, 1944 “Germany Occupies Hungary”).
- b. Have students with a card, preview/silently read through their cards. Ask a partner for any clarification needed.
- c. In chronological order, **have the students read the cards and then place it on the wall or 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 foundational Timeline Activity](#). If teachers are already using this lesson, swap in the Elie Wiesel cards in place of the main cards for duplicated events/laws.]

Teacher Note: The classroom video [Bearing Witness: Elie Wiesel and Night](#) (8:04) may be used in support of or instead of the Timeline Activity for historical context.

- d. 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)

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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*.**

Teacher Note: The classroom video [Bearing Witness: Elie Wiesel and Night](#) (8:04) may be used in support of or instead of the Timeline Activity for historical context.

- 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. Students work together to answer the questions below 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?

- e. Use the questions below for a class discussion or student written reflection: Or complete a think/write/pair/share.

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

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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 was Elie Wiesel changed by the Holocaust experiences he described in *Night* (change over time)?
- How did 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:

- a. **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
- b. **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.

2. Purpose of a Memoir

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

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happened to them and how it changed them, to provide a personal perspective on a historical event or time)

3. 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)
- 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.

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- 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 their original response (from b above), and review the question below and explain how their understanding of Wiesel's reason for writing *Night* is more complex.

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

Option 2: How was Elie Wiesel changed by the Holocaust experiences he described in *Night* (change over time)? How did 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.

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- 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

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 event noted on the timeline card 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?

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2. Class Discussion or Journal Prompts

As students continue to read, use the following questions for small group or class discussion, journal prompts, essay responses, etc.:

- 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*?

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?

Note: Teachers may need to define unfamiliar vocabulary words in the *New York Times* article.

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.

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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.]

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?