Summary

At the beginning of *Night*, Wiesel introduces someone he met toward the end of 1941. His name was Moshe, and he became one of the boy’s teachers. They discussed religious topics, and one day they talked about prayer. Wiesel asked Moshe why he prayed, and his teacher replied that he prayed for strength to ask God the right questions. Later, the Hungarian police deported Moshe from Sighet, Wiesel’s hometown, because he was a foreigner. His destination was Poland and death at the hands of the Germans, but somehow Moshe escaped and found his way back to Sighet. The Jews of Sighet did not believe his tale of destruction.

Although the Holocaust was raging all around them, the Hungarian Jews were not decimated until 1944. Their lives began to change drastically, however, once the Germans occupied Hungary that March. In a matter of days, Sighet’s Jews had to deal with quarantines, expropriations of their property, and the yellow stars that targeted them. Then they were ghettoized and deported. Jammed into train cars, destination unknown, the Jews of Sighet—Elie Wiesel, his little sister, Tzipora, and their parents among them—eventually crossed the Polish frontier and arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Emerging from their train-car prisons into midnight air fouled by burning flesh, the Jews of Sighet were separated by the secret police: men to the left, women to the right. Wiesel lost sight of his mother and little sister, not fully aware that the parting was forever. Father and son stuck together. Spared the fate of Wiesel’s mother and sister, they were not “selected” for the gas chambers but for slave labor instead. From late May, 1944, until mid-January, 1945, Wiesel and his father endured Auschwitz’s brutal regimen. As the Red Army approached the camp, the two were evacuated to Germany. Severely weakened by the death march to Buchenwald, Wiesel’s father perished there, but the son was liberated on April 11, 1945.

*Night* covers in detail these events, but it is much more than a chronological narrative. The power of this memoir emerges especially from the anguished questions that Wiesel’s Holocaust experiences will not put to rest. Before he entered Auschwitz, Wiesel “believed profoundly.” Yet on that fateful night, and in the days that followed, his world changed forever. Optimism about humankind, trust in the world, confidence in God—Auschwitz radically threatened, if it did not destroy, so many reasons for hope.

This point is illustrated especially well by one of the book’s most unforgettable moments. Wiesel describes the hanging of three Auschwitz prisoners—one of them a child. As the prisoners watched the child die, Wiesel heard a man asking: “For God’s sake, where is God?” Wiesel writes that “from within me. I heard a voice answer: ’Where He is? This is where—hanging here from this gallows.’”

Death’s reign in the Kingdom of Night was so pervasive that Wiesel ends *Night* by reporting that a corpse stared back at him when he saw his own reflection in a mirror for the first time after liberation. Yet *Night* does not give death—God’s or humanity’s—the last word. By breaking silence, by telling a story that is full of
reasons for despair, Wiesel protests against the wasting of life and testifies for the mending of the world by
humankind and God alike.

Summary

*Night*, Elie Wiesel’s memoir of the Holocaust, tells of his concentration camp experience. Encompassing
events from the end of 1941 to 1945, the book ponders a series of questions, whose answers, Moché the
Beadle, who was miraculously saved from an early German massacre, reminds the boy, lie “only within
yourself.”

Moché, who teaches the boy the beauty of biblical studies, is a strange character with a clownish
awkwardness, more God’s madman than mentally ill; he is also a recurring figure in later Wiesel works. After
Moché returns to town to describe the horrible scenes he has witnessed, no one listens to this apparently
insane rambler who, like Cassandra, repeats his warnings in vain. The clown, a moving and tragic fool, is
unable to convince the Jewish community of its impending doom. Despite arrests, ghettoizations, and mass
deportations, the Jews still cannot believe him, even as they embark for Auschwitz.

In 1944, the young narrator is initiated into the horrors of the archipelago of Nazi death camps. There he
becomes A-7713, deprived of name, self-esteem, identity. He observes and undergoes hunger, exhaustion,
cold, suffering, brutality, executions, cruelty, breakdown in personal relationships, and flames and smoke
coming from crematories in the German death factories. In the barracks of terror, where he sees the death of
his mother and seven-year-old sister, his religious faith is corroded. The world no longer represents God’s
mind. Comparing himself to Job, he bitterly asks God for an explanation of such evil. The boy violently
rejects God’s presence and God’s justice, love, and mercy: “I was alone—terribly alone in a world without
God and without man.”

After a death march and brutally cruel train ride, young Wiesel and his father arrive at Buchenwald, where his
father soon dies of malnutrition and dysentery. As in a daze, the son waits to be killed by fleeing German
soldiers. Instead, he coolly notes, on April 11, 1945, “at about six o’clock in the evening, the first American
tank stood at the gates of Buchenwald.”

In addition to wanting to elucidate the unfathomable secret of death and theodicy, the narrator lived a
monstrous, stunted, and isolated existence as an adult. He saw himself as victim, executioner, and spectator.
By affirming that he was not divided among the three but was in fact all of them at once, he was able to
resolve his identity problem. The autobiography’s last image shows Wiesel looking at himself in a mirror: The
body and soul are wounded, but the night and its nightmares are finally over.

Additional Summary: Summary

Eliezer lives with his parents and his three sisters in the village of Sighet in Transylvania. He studies the
Talmud, the Jewish holy book, under the tutelage of Moshe the Beadle. Late in 1941, the Hungarian police
expel all foreign Jews, including Moshe, from Sighet in cattle cars. Several months later, Moshe returns and
informs Eliezer that the deported Jews had been turned over to the German Gestapo and executed in a forest
in Poland. Moshe had managed to escape. He had returned to Sighet to warn the Jewish community of what
would happen to all Jews if they remained in the area.

Moshe’s warning is ignored, and the Jews of Sighet continue with their daily routines. During the Passover
celebration of 1944, however, German soldiers arrive in Sighet, arrest Jewish leaders, confiscate the valuables
of Jewish townspeople, and force all Jews to live in a restricted section of town. A short time later, all of
Sighet’s Jews are forced into cattle cars and transported to Auschwitz, the site of a Nazi concentration camp in
Poland. On the train ride to Auschwitz, one woman goes mad; in her delirium, she has visions of a huge furnace spewing flames, a foreshadowing of the crematories that would take the lives of many concentration camp inmates.

When they arrive at Auschwitz, Eliezer and his father are separated from his mother and sisters. Many children are led directly toward a crematory, where they are immediately executed. All the men have their heads shaved and a number tattooed on their arms. Eliezer and his fellow captives are forced to live in squalid barracks; they are fed only bread, water, and tasteless broth. Although many of the inmates pray for strength to survive their horrific ordeal, Eliezer ceases to pray, and he begins to doubt God’s sense of justice.

A short time later, Eliezer, his father, and hundreds of others are marched to another concentration camp, Buna, where conditions are no better. Eliezer is assigned to work in a warehouse, and he is sometimes beaten by his supervisor. Eliezer’s gold-crowned tooth, an article of value to his captors, is removed with a rusty spoon by a concentration camp dentist. Eliezer is whipped after being caught watching his supervisor having sex with a young Polish girl. During Eliezer’s stay at Buna, four inmates are hanged for breaking concentration camp rules. At various times, weak and sick inmates are selected for execution in the crematories.

Eliezer loses his faith. He accuses God of creating the concentration camps and of running its crematories. He refuses to fast on Yom Kippur, the Jewish holy day. Other inmates share Eliezer’s sense of despair. One inmate selected for extermination asks his friends to say the Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead, for him, but no one recites the prayer when the man is executed. Eliezer’s faith can not sustain him; he survives mainly because of his love and concern for his father, who is weakening with each passing week.

When the Russian army moves toward Buna, Eliezer and his fellow inmates are ordered on a forced march through the snow-covered Polish countryside. The weaker captives who cannot maintain the rapid pace fall by the roadside and die or are shot by the German guards. During one rest stop, dozens of inmates fall dead from exhaustion.

After a long trek, the captives arrive at Gliwitz, another concentration camp. Eliezer meets Juliek, a boy whom Eliezer had first seen at Auschwitz. Juliek plays the violin, and he had managed to keep the instrument in his possession during his stay in the camps. During Eliezer’s first evening at Gliwitz, Juliek plays Beethoven’s Violin Concerto, which moves Eliezer. The next morning, Eliezer sees Juliek’s corpse lying on the barracks floor.

A few days later, Eliezer, his father, and hundreds of other inmates are packed into open cattle cars and transported to Buchenwald, another concentration camp. En route, many captives die and are unceremoniously thrown from the train cars; their naked corpses are left unburied in open fields. As the train passes through towns, people throw bread into the open cars, then watch as the prisoners beat and kill each other for food.

By the time the train reaches Buchenwald, Eliezer’s father is seriously ill with dysentery. Eliezer keeps a vigil at his father’s bedside. A guard hits Eliezer’s father in the head when he asks for water. The next day, when Eliezer awakes, his father is gone; he had been taken to the crematory and put to death.

Eliezer lives for about three months at Buchenwald. In April, 1945, as the war nears its end, an evacuation of Buchenwald is announced. An air raid postpones the planned evacuation. Several days later, members of a resistance movement in the camp decide to act. After a brief battle, the German guards depart, leaving the camp in the hands of the resistance leaders. Later that day, an American tank approaches the gates of Buchenwald and liberates the camp.
Three days after the liberation of Buchenwald, Eliezer is hospitalized with food poisoning. In the hospital, he looks at a mirror and sees the face of a corpse staring back at him.

**Additional Summary: Summary**

**Sighet**

*Night* opens with a description of Moshe the Beadle, a poor Jew in Sighet, who is teaching Jewish mysticism to young Eliezer. After Moshe is expelled with the other foreign-born Jews, he miraculously returns to tell the Jews of Sighet that all those who were expelled have been killed. However, none of the villagers believe him, and eventually Moshe stops telling his tale. In the spring of 1944, German troops appear in Sighet, and the occupiers issue anti-Semitic decrees and establish two Jewish ghettos. Eventually, the Jews of Sighet are told that they are going to be evacuated.

The Germans pack Eliezer and his family onto a train. Madame Schacter screams every night that she sees a fire and the others try to silence her, shaken by her insanity. It is not until they approach the camp itself, and see flames, that they realize that she has predicted their fate. They have arrived at Birkenau.

**Birkenau**

The guards order the men and women to separate, and Eliezer is parted from his mother and little sister forever. He and his father see little children being burned alive and Eliezer realizes that he will never forget the sight. In the barracks, Eliezer's father asks an SS officer where the lavatories are and the man strikes him. Eliezer does nothing for fear of being struck himself, but he vows never to forgive the staking of his father. The men are then marched to Auschwitz.

**Auschwitz**

The men arrive at their block, where the prisoner in charge speaks the first human words they have yet heard. Later the men are tattooed and Eliezer becomes A-7713; he has been stripped even of his name.

A relative of Eliezer's, Stein, manages to find them, and Eliezer lies that Stein's wife and children are well. Stein continues to visit them occasionally, until he goes to find news of his family and Eliezer never sees him again. After three weeks, the remaining men in the block are marched to Buna, another camp.

**Buna**

At Buna, the men are transferred to the musicians' block and begin work at an electrical equipment warehouse. Eliezer befriends Tibbi and Yossi, two Zionist brothers with whom he talks of emigrating to Palestine after the war.

Idek, the Kapo, beats Eliezer for no apparent reason. A French girl wipes his bloodstained forehead and says a few comforting words. On another day, Idek beats Eliezer's father with an iron bar, and instead of feeling anger towards Idek, Eliezer feels anger towards his father for not knowing how to avoid Idek's blows.

The foreman, Franek, demands Eliezer's gold crown. When Eliezer refuses, Franek begins to punish Eliezer's father for not marching properly. Finally, father and son decide to give up the crown, which is removed by a dentist to whom Eliezer must pay a ration of bread.

On a Sunday, usually a day of rest, Eliezer finds Idek in the warehouse with a girl, and Idek has Eliezer whipped twenty-five times. On another Sunday, the camp is bombed. One man crawls towards two pots of soup, and all the men watch him enviously. He dies with his body poised over the soup. The camp is not destroyed by the air raid, but it gives the men hope.
A man is hanged, and the other prisoners are forced to witness it. Later, there is another hanging, this time of a child, beloved in the camp, who has been associated with the Resistance. The child dies a slow, agonizing and silent death as the men weep. Someone in the crowd asks where God is, and Eliezer hears a voice inside him reply that God is on the gallows.

The men debate how to celebrate Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, but Eliezer's heart revolts at the thought of celebrating. On Rosh Hashanah, he finds his father and kisses his hand, silently, as a tear drops between them, knowing that they have never understood each other so clearly. Later, on Yom Kippur, the men debate whether or not they should fast. Eliezer eats, viewing it as an act of rebellion against God, but feels a great void in his heart nonetheless.

After Eliezer has been transferred to the building unit, a selection occurs. Eliezer is not selected for death, and Eliezer's father thinks he has also passed, but after several days they find out that his number was written down. While awaiting another, decisive selection, Eliezer's father gives his knife and spoon. The next day, everyone is kind to Eliezer, already treating him like an orphan. When the day is over, he finds that his father has escaped the second selection, and gives him back his knife and spoon.

In wintertime, Eliezer enters the hospital for an operation on his foot. While he recovers there, he hears that the camp is being evacuated. Eliezer and his father decide to evacuate with the others. We are told that those who stayed behind in the hospital were liberated by the Russians two days after the evacuation.

The men march away from the camp, then begin to run. Those who cannot keep up are shot; others are trampled to death in the crowd. Only his father's presence keeps Eliezer from succumbing to death. When the men are finally allowed to stop, Eliezer's father pushes him towards a brick factory, where they agree to take turns sleeping. Rabbi Eliahou enters the factory, looking for his son; Eliezer realizes the Rabbi's son has abandoned his father. Eliezer prays for the strength never to do what Rabbi Eliahou's son has done.

**Gleiwitz**

The men arrive at Gleiwitz, trampling each other on the way into the barracks. As Eliezer lies on a pile of men, he realizes that Juliek is playing his violin, giving a concert to dead and dying men. When he wakes up, he sees Juliek's corpse and his smashed violin beside him.

At Gleiwitz, Eliezer saves his father from selection. Later, on the train, Eliezer's father does not wake, and Eliezer slaps him back to life before the men can throw him out with the corpses. At one stop, onlookers throw bread into the cars, and the men fight each other for it. Eliezer sees a son kill his father for a crust of bread and the son, in turn, killed by other men. When they reach Buchenwald, a dozen men, including Eliezer and his father, are left in the wagon out of the hundred who began the journey.

**Buchenwald**

At Buchenwald, Eliezer's father announces that he is ready to die, but Eliezer forces him to continue on. Later, his father develops dysentery and is unable to leave his bed. Eliezer arranges to stay near his father, but when his father begs him for water, an SS clouts him on the head, and Eliezer does not move, afraid he will also be hit. Eliezer's father's last word is his name; the next day, he is gone. Eliezer has no more tears to weep, and in his weakened conscience he feels freedom.

Eliezer is transferred to the children's block, beyond all grief. Wiesel says nothing about the events of the rest of the winter. On April 10th, the Germans are going to evacuate the camp, then blow it up, but after the inmates are assembled, the Resistance rises up and takes over the camp, and American tanks arrive at Buchenwald that evening. After liberation, Eliezer nearly dies of food poisoning. When he recovers, he looks at himself in the mirror, something he has not done since he was in Sighet, and a corpse stares back at him.
Chapter Summaries: Section 1 Summary

As a child in Sighet, Hungary, Elie Wiesel lives with his shop-owner father, his mother, and three sisters. Elie wants to study the cabbala, the mystical studies of the Jewish traditions. When he asks permission from his father, he is told that he is too young, that it is not until the age of thirty that one is considered mature enough to take on this extensive course of study. But Elie decides that he will find a teacher for himself. When he is twelve, at the end of 1941, he encounters Moshe the Beadle, who works at the synagogue. Moshe questions him, telling him that man raises himself toward God by the questions he asks. Yet man cannot understand the answers that God gives him. Moshe states that it is only within oneself that one can find the answers. Moshe thus prays that God will give him the strength to ask the right questions. And so Elie begins his study of the cabbala with Moshe.

One day it is announced that all foreign Jews are expelled from Hungary. Moshe and the others are crammed onto cattle cars and transported out of the city. After some months, Moshe is back in Sighet. He tells the story that he and the others were brought into a forest where they were made to dig huge graves. Then they were killed, including the small babies, who were used as target practice. Moshe had only a wounded leg. Eventually he escaped and returned home. When he tells of what is happening to the Jews, no one believes him.

In the spring of 1944, there is news that the Germans are being defeated. Then the Fascist party rises to power. Soon, German troops enter the village. They are housed in the homes of the residents, even the Jews. They are well behaved until the week of Passover. It is then announced that every Jew must wear a yellow star, and their rights are placed under severe restrictions. Elie’s father does not see any harm in wearing the yellow star. “You don’t die of it,” he said. Then the Jews are rounded up into two ghettos. Elie’s family is in the larger one. The Jews form their own council of self-government. The word then comes that all the Jews in Sighet are to be deported. Thinking that perhaps it is only to protect them from the advancing troops, the Jews do not yet panic. Street by street, the Jews are driven out of the large ghetto and crammed into the smaller one. An old servant, Martha, tells the Wiesel family to come to her village for safety. Elie’s father refuses to leave his wife and baby, and the other children refuse to be separated. On the Sabbath, they are herded into the synagogue. The next morning they are loaded onto trains.

Chapter Summaries: Section 2 Summary

There is not enough space for all the people on the transport train, so the Jews must stand or occasionally take turns sitting. The young people flirt in the darkness, and the others pretend not to notice. Thirst and heat take their toll after two days. Having some provisions, they eat a little but are always mindful to leave some for the next day.

When the train stops on the Czechoslovakian border, the Jews know that they are leaving Hungary. A German officer tells them that if they still have any valuables, they should hand them over now or be shot. He tells those who feel ill to go to the hospital car. Since there are eighty people in the car, there had better be eighty people when they arrive, or else they will all be shot.

A woman known to the Wiesels, Madame Schachter, is with her ten-year-old son. Her husband and other sons had been mistakenly transported previously. Because of the tragedy, Madame Schachter has lost her mind. In the dark, she cries out, “Fire! I can see a fire!” The others by the window look out but see nothing. They tell the woman to be quiet but she still cries out. Someone tries to calm her, but she continues to warn of fire. Her young son tries to make her be quiet. Eventually some men tie her up and gag her. Their nerves are all on edge. Somehow she gets loose and again cries out, “Fire!” They tie her up again, even strike her. All through the night she continues to cry out. During the day she is quiet, but when night returns, so do her cries.
After several days, the train stops. They discover that they are at Auschwitz, but the name means nothing to them. They hear that it is a good work camp where the families can stay together. Madame Schachter stands up and again cries out, “The fire! The furnace! Look over there!” They all look out but again see nothing. After several hours, the train begins to move and Madame Schachter cries out again. The others look out, and this time they see flames coming from the top of a tall chimney, along with a terrible burning odor. The doors of the train open and guards order them at. They are at Birkenau, the reception center for Auschwitz.

Chapter Summaries: Section 3 Summary

At Birkenau, the men and women are separated. In hindsight, Elie realizes that this was the last time he saw his mother and sister alive. One of the prisoners warns him to say he is eighteen, though he is in fact fourteen, and his father is to say he is forty instead of fifty. Another man comes to them and asks what they are doing here. At Auschwitz they are going to be thrown into the furnaces, he tells them. Some of the new prisoners contemplate attacking the guards, and an old man tells everyone that they must never lose faith.

When Elie approaches the notorious Dr. Mengele, “the Angel of Death,” he is asked his age. Elie replies that he is eighteen. When asked his occupation, he contemplates saying he is a student but instead says he is a farmer. He is motioned to go to the left, as is his father. A prisoner tells them that the left path leads to the crematory. Elie passes the ditch where bodies are being burned, and he sees small children and babies burning. He realizes that his reality is now a nightmare. His father regrets that Elie did not tell his true age, as many boys were sent along with their mothers. Elie’s father believes that they are all going to the crematory. Elie states that he would rather throw himself on the electric fence and take his own life than suffer the flames of the furnace. His father does not reply but only weeps. Around him, the men begin to sing the Kaddish, the prayer for the dead. It is the first time that Elie has heard anyone sing the prayer for the dead on their own behalf. As for Elie, he refuses to pray to a God who is silent in the midst of this hell. He remembers the cries of Madame Schachter on the train. This is what she saw.

At the barracks, the men are told to undress, and all their hair is shaved off. They are disinfected and then sent through the showers. Clothes are thrown to them. It is night. They are now in Auschwitz. The guard tells them there are only two choices: work or death. If they refuse to work, they will be sent to the crematory. Elie’s father is seized with colic and requests to use the lavatory. He is knocked down and sent back into line.

For several days they do no work. Their arms are tattooed with identification numbers. A relative from Belgium finds the Wiesels and asks about his wife and children. Elie lies and tells him they are well, although he actually knows nothing about their situation. After three weeks in Auschwitz, the men are marched to a new camp called Buna.

Chapter Summaries: Section 4 Summary

At Buna, Elie is sent to work sorting electrical fixtures. A pair of brothers, Yossi and Tibi, befriends him. They speak of Palestine, where Elie’s father refused to immigrate. Unlike him, they would take the first boat to Haifa if they could.

Elie is moved to the musicians’ block, headed by a German Jew. Life is a little easier for them. Elie is sent to the dentist to have his gold crown removed, but he pleads illness. The dentist lets him go, as long as he promises to return. Elie does so in a week. The dentist is so impressed that he came back of his own accord that he lets him go again. Not long after, the dentist is executed for taking some of the prisoners’ gold teeth for himself.
In the warehouse where he works, Elie is often by a French girl. Because they cannot speak each other’s language, they do not converse. One day one of the guards, Idek, beats Elie for no reason. The French girl wipes the blood away and gives him a piece of bread, speaking German to him. Many years later in Paris, Elie sees a beautiful young woman whom he recognizes as the French girl. He asks her if she were Jewish. She replies that she was, but she passed as an Aryan. The German words she spoke to him that day put her in danger, but she knew Elie wouldn’t give her away.

One day, when the prisoners are loading engines onto trains, Idek the guard begins to beat Elie’s father. Elie merely moves away to avoid being beaten himself. He reflects that this coldness toward the suffering of his own father was a part of what the concentration camp had made of him.

At another time, the foreman Franek demands that Elie give him his gold crown. Elie tells him that he cannot eat without it and refuses. He says he must ask his father’s advice first. Mr. Wiesel tells him that he must not give up his crown. Franek, however, knows how to torture Elie. Mr. Wiesel is not adept at marching, never having served in the military. Franek repeatedly beats him every time he missteps. Elie tries to teach his father to march, but eventually he gives in and lets Franek remove his crown. Later Franek was transferred with the rest of the Poles, so Elie lost his gold crown for nothing.

One Sunday, Elie catches Idek trying to rape a young Polish girl. Idek threatens him if he should tell anyone about it. Later, Idek calls Elie out from roll call, has him lie across a crate, and beats him.

An air raid is sounded on another Sunday. The prisoners hope that the camp is destroyed by the bombing Americans—even if it should mean that they are killed. Only one man is killed, a man who tried to reach the soup cauldron. A week later, one of the prisoners is hanged and displayed before the others. Elie is not bothered by it. However, when a boy servant is hanged with two others who had helped one of the guards stockpile arms, Elie is tormented by the sight of the boy taking a half hour to slowly strangle to death on the gallows. One of the prisoners asks, “Where is God now?” Another answers, “Where is He? Here He is—He is hanging on this gallows.”

**Chapter Summaries: Section 5 Summary**

As the end of the Jewish year approaches, the prisoners gather to celebrate Rosh Hashanah. As prayers are made to God, Elie cannot bring himself to pray to a God whom he feels has forgotten him. In his youth he had viewed the Jewish New Year as a time to pray for forgiveness of his sins. Now he refuses to plead. He feels strong, stronger than the God who deserted him. On Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the question arises of fasting. If they fast in their weakened condition, it could mean death. The majority of the prisoners decide that such a fast would be especially meaningful. Elie, on the orders of his father, does not join in the fast. As he eats, he feels a great void.

After the New Year, a selection is announced. This means that the prisoners will be examined for physical fitness. Those who are too weak to work will be sent to the crematory. One of the prisoners advises Elie and his two friends to run around, bringing a glow to their bodies. They are also advised to run very fast straight toward the guards during the selection. Elie runs so fast that the guards could not even see his number. His father also believes that he has escaped. Several days later, however, when the numbers are read of those who are to remain in camp, Elie’s father is one of the number. He gives Elie his knife and spoon (Elie calls them his “inheritance”) and tells Elie not to give up hope. There is a possibility he might escape the second selection. As Elie works all day, he fears what he will find when he returns to the barracks. When the day is through, he discovers that his father is alive. He made it through the second selection.
Winter settles in, along with extreme cold. Elie’s foot becomes swollen from the cold. When he can no longer walk, he goes to the medical section. It is decided that Elie will have an operation. Elie fears that his foot will be amputated, so he is overjoyed on awakening to discover that the doctor merely drained some pus off the sole of his foot. As he recuperates, he learns that the Russian army is approaching and there is to be an evacuation. He is not sure that he could walk with his foot, and he learns that those in the hospital wing will be left behind. His father contemplates staying behind as well to nurse him, but then they learn that it is likely that the patients in the hospital will be executed and sent to the crematory before the Russians arrive. Elie and his father decide to evacuate with the others. After the war, Elie learns that the patients were liberated by the Russian army two days after the evacuation.

Chapter Summaries: Section 6 Summary

As the prisoners walk through the night, the snow and the cold become overwhelming. The SS guards force them to run faster, which Elie sees positively as a means to get warm. He drags his skeletal body forward, feeling that it weighs much more than it does. By his side runs Zalman, a young Polish boy from the electrical warehouse. He is overcome with stomach cramps. When he stops to relieve himself, his is trampled to death by the prisoners. Elie now fears that his wounded foot will cause him to stumble and face a similar fate. It is only his father’s presence that keeps him going.

By morning they run forty-two miles. They come to a deserted village and stop at a warehouse. Cramming into the building, they find that the snow covers the inside as well as out. Elie lies down to sleep but his father pulls him up, afraid that he will freeze to death in the snow. They go outside only to find corpses in the snow. Stepping over them, the father and son find a place to sit down inside a shed. Mr. Wiesel wants Elie to sleep some, with him keeping guard to prevent him from freezing. Two other friends had done the same thing. One is dead; the other falls asleep, certain to die as well.

An old man, Rabbi Eliahou, comes into the shed, looking for his son. They had stayed together for three years, moving from camp to camp. Elie says that he has not seen him. When the rabbi leaves, Elie suddenly remembers that he did indeed see his son, running ahead of his father. Elie is horrified that the son was trying to outdistance the father, whom he felt was soon to die and did not want to be bothered with him. Elie prays to the God in whom he no longer believes that he would not ever do the same thing.

The prisoners march on, the guards driving them ever forward. There is no longer any discipline in the march, just a movement forward as best they can. At last they reach the camp at Gleiwitz. All the prisoners fall down where they are. Elie fears he will be crushed to death. He discovers that under him is Juliek, the violin player from Buna. Juliek confesses that he is afraid of being shot, since he brought his violin with him. Elie loses consciousness, and when he awakes, he hears Juliek playing Beethoven. Ever after, when he heard Beethoven, Elie thought of the young Polish violinist.

The prisoners stay at Gleiwitz for three days. They are not given food or water. Not allowed to bend down, they survive by using their spoons to scoop snow off the back of the person in front of them.

Chapter Summaries: Section 7 Summary

Loaded back on the train, Elie, his father, and the other prisoners become lethargic, unable to fight against approaching death. When daylight appears, Elie sees a cluster of human shapes covered with snow and frost. He sees a man who has frozen to death. Beside him, his father does not move. Elie tries to awaken him but gets no response. If his father dies, Elie states, Elie has no reason to live.
The train stops in the middle of a deserted field. SS officers open the door, telling the prisoners to throw out the dead bodies. The living rejoice because it will mean more room. The dead are stripped of their clothes and thrown out into the snowy field. Elie desperately tries to wake up his father, slapping his face repeatedly. At last his father’s eyes blink. The guards move on.

The prisoners are given no food. They live on the snow that blows through the openings. Ten days pass. At one stop someone throws in a piece of bread. The prisoners dive for the crumbs as the German guards laugh at them. Elie flashes forward to a time in Aden (in Yemen in Africa) when a French tourist threw out coins to the local children. They scramble to get it, reminding Elie of the prisoners fighting over the bread on the train. Elie begs the woman to stop, but she states that she enjoys giving “charity.” Elie sees an old man crawl from the huddle with his hand clutched to his chest. Initially, Elie thinks the man was wounded, but he soon realizes that he has a crust of bread. The old man’s son beats his father, trying to get the bread. The others throw themselves on the two, who are soon crushed under the burden. Elie is horrified that he saw a fifteen-year-old son try to keep the last morsel of food from a father.

One night, Elie wakes up to find someone trying to strangle him. His father cannot stave off the attacker, so he calls for Meir Katz, a friend from Banu. At last Elie is freed. Later, Katz tells Elie’s father that he is fading fast. Mr. Wiesel tells him to hold on and to not lose faith in himself.

On the last day, someone warns the prisoners not to stay seated but to get up and move to keep from freezing. They all get up and move a few steps when a cry breaks out. Someone has died. The others also cry out, this death of all deaths affecting them. The cries spread from car to car. That evening, the train arrives at Buchenwald. Of the one hundred men who got on the train, only a dozen are left alive.

Chapter Summaries: Section 8 Summary

At the gate of Buchenwald, the SS officers sort the prisoners into groups of five, then into groups of one hundred. Elie holds onto his father’s hand, ever fearful that they would become separated. One of the prisoners tells them that they would have a hot shower and then go to their barracks and bed. Elie encourages his father to hang on, but he does not respond. There is a crowd trying to get into the showers. Mr. Wiesel, growing ever weaker, begs Elie to leave him. He sits down on a snow bank, only to find that it is a pile of frozen corpses. Elie screams at him to get up, that he cannot rest yet. Mr. Wiesel, slowly losing his touch with reality, tells Elie to let the corpses sleep, but Elie shouts that they will never wake.

The sirens begin to wail and there is an air raid alert. Elie goes into the blocks, leaving his father behind. At daybreak, he realizes what he has done. He does not want to be like the sons he has seen who have abandoned their fathers. He goes out to find him, hoping that he will not, so that he can be freed of his burden and concentrate on his own survival. After hours, Elie finds him in line for coffee. He sees that he is fading fast. Over the next several days, Mr. Wiesel, often does not recognize Elie. At last, overcome with dysentery, he tells Elie where he hid the gold in the cellar. Elie tries to get a doctor to care for his father, but each physician tells him that his father’s case is hopeless and recommends that he no longer feed him but instead take care of himself. Mr. Wiesel begs for water, but Elie hesitates to give him some because of the dysentery.

When Elie visits his father, Mr. Wiesel tells him that the people around him beat him and steal his bread. Elie decides to act as if he, himself, is an invalid and stays with his father. On January 28, 1945, Elie hears his father call his name from the bunk below. He does not answer. The next morning, Elie looks in his father’s bunk and finds another invalid. Someone took his father in the night and threw him in the crematory, perhaps not yet dead. Elie cannot weep. All he can think is “free at last!”
Chapter Summaries: Section 9 Summary

Elie remains at Buchenwald until April 11. The time between his father’s death and his release are a blank. Nothing matters in life; nothing can touch him. He is transferred to the children’s block (he is fifteen years old) along with six hundred others. The end of the war is approaching. The Allied armies are approaching. However, the only thought that Elie has is of food. All his dreams are about food.

On April 5, there is a delay in the call to gather in the square. This has never happened before; everyone is sure something has happened. Two hours later, the loudspeaker announces that all Jews must come to the assembly place. Elie is sure that this is the end for the Jews, that Hitler’s Final Solution of the extinction of all of them is about to take place. The guard tells the children that this is the only thing they can do. However, one of prisoners tells them to go back to their block and stay there, which they do. There is a camp resistance organization that has armed itself and is prepared to fight back should the final extinction commence. They will not let the Jews be exterminated.

A general roll call is announced in which all the prisoners will have to present themselves. The head of the camp announces that Buchenwald will be liquidated (abandoned and destroyed). Ten blocks of prisoners will be evacuated each day. There will be no more bread or soup.

Five days later, with still twenty thousand prisoners in the camp, the decision is made to evacuate everyone at once. The camp will be blown up. As everyone is massed in the assembly square, the air raid sirens begin to wail. The prisoners return to the blocks, planning to evacuate the next day.

The prisoners have had no food for six days. The next morning, the resistance movement takes action. They rise up in arms everywhere. With guns and bombs overhead, the children lie flat inside the blocks. The SS officers flee. The prisoners are in charge of the camp. That evening, the first American tank arrives.

The prisoners think of nothing but food. Elie contracts food poisoning and spends two weeks hovering near death. When he is able to stand up, he looks at himself in the mirror. He sees the face and the eyes of a corpse. It is the first time he has looked in a mirror since he left the ghetto the year before. Elie states that the look in the eyes in the mirror, looking back at him, has never left him.

Themes

Death

"Someone began to recite the Khaddish, the prayer for the dead. I do not know if it has ever happened before, in the long history of the Jews, that people have ever recited the prayer for the dead for themselves."

This moment of prayer comes right after arriving at Auschwitz—"Haven't you heard about it?"—when the group is being marched "to the crematory." They will not be killed (not yet), but the terror this welcome march inflicts serves to instill despondency, melancholia, and separation of the prisoners from each other. The Germans knew this, they knew that their prisoners could not have empathy: the faster the prisoners live for themselves alone, the faster they die together. Eliezer grasps the message of their first walk, saying, "[h]umanity is not concerned with us." There is no one to witness their death and no one to mourn them with the right prayer except themselves. Later, when Akiba Drumer is selected for death, he asks them to recite the Khaddish for him—they forget to do so because they are preoccupied with survival.

Death is a pervasive element in a story about death camps. Death is fundamental to human society—anthropologists cite burial practices as the foundation of civilization. The Nazi "slaughterhouses" and "factories of death" are antithetical to this civilized practice of death; the Final Solution is an absolute
mockery of human rights and values. The effect of this madness on persons normally a part of a culture organized around a detailed belief system is a breakdown of their social compact with each other and a fall into melancholia. The incapacitating effect of the melancholia each prisoner had—worrying only about himself—lead to the utterly gross situations of a son killing a father for a bite of bread. Finally, it is within this breakdown of empathy among the people in the camps which makes the moment of Chlomo’s final gasp—his son’s name—and Juliek’s swan song possibly beautiful but most likely pathetic to those hearing it.

Throughout the story, men, like Reizel, say they live only because they believe their children may still be alive. Eliezer admits several times that a similar relationship exists between himself and his father. Empathy and the human need of community in the face of death, so as to mourn properly, must be put back together afterward. This is why the stories of the camps must be told and not silenced. Only madness remains if mourning occurs without empathy—only the ghastly and solitary image of one survivor seeing himself in the mirror remains. The survivors must mourn with other survivors—"let’s keep together. We shall be stronger"—if they are to escape the madness of the camps and the memory.

**God and Religion**

The community of faith to which Eliezer belongs is Hasidic. This is a sect of Judaism that came into being during the eighteenth century, and its precepts have considerable bearing upon the events of the novel. Hasidism teaches belief in a personal relationship with God. In such a system, awe of God combines with emotion toward God. One can protest, love, fear, and question God without compromising God or contradicting faith. One of Wiesel’s favorite prayers may serve as a summary: "Master of the Universe, know that the children of Israel are suffering too much; they deserve redemption, they need it. But if, for reasons unknown to me, You are not willing, not yet, then redeem all the other nations, but do it soon!"

With this very brief summary in mind, the disposition of the prisoners grappling with the hell they are in begins to make some sense. Neither those who doubt or question God, as does Eliezer, nor those who never doubt, betray their faith. Hasidism is antagonistic, "man questions God and God answers. But we don’t understand His answers." And yet it is true that the Shoah, or Holocaust was too much for Eliezer to immediately reconcile with his religion. He was questioning but he was growing tired of God’s silence.

A key figure in this system is Job, a biblical character whose faith in God was persecuted and tested in extremity. "How I sympathized with Job!" says Eliezer, "I did not deny God’s existence, but I doubted his absolute justice." Comparatively, Job had it easy. Yet the comparison with that biblical figure undermines the tendency to conclude that Eliezer lost his faith. He lost many things but he did not lose, entirely, his faith in the morality of a social compact among men with God. This is what is important, maintaining human dignity by maintaining the empathy of society—not the question of whether or not to fast on some holy day. But it takes the telling of the story of *Night* to realize this. Meanwhile, in the death camps, Eliezer confesses that "in the depths of my heart, I felt a great void" and "we forgot to say the Khaddish" for Akiba Drumer.

**Sanity and Insanity**

There are many examples of madness exhibited during the novel. Two in particular stand out as representing the greater insanity of the Holocaust. The first is the hysterical Madame Schachter and the second is Idek’s enthusiasm for work—being more than a simply mockery of the motto "Work is liberty!"

The first example recalls Moshe the Beadle’s attempt to warn his fellow Jews of the impending doom. They brushed him off while they were still apparently safe ("You don’t die of [the Yellow Star] … " said Chlomo). When they realized he was right, it was too late. Finding themselves on a hermetically sealed cattle wagon in the dead of night, they are trapped with their worst fears. Madame Schachter begins screaming out their fear: being offered as burnt sacrifice to the Nazi ideal. They physically lash her. They pity her as merely mad because they cannot believe any real harm will come of their deportation. The Germans are human after all. Even Madame Schachter as madness is silenced when her screamed hallucinations become reality and the
flames of the crematorium become visible from the cattle car window.

Kapo Idek "has bouts of madness now and then, when it's best to keep out of his way." That is, he is prone to fits of violence—something neither Eliezer nor his father could avoid forever. One Sunday Idek moved "hundreds of prisoners so that he could lie with a girl! It struck me as so funny that I burst out laughing." This self-indulgence is done with forethought, it is not a fit. He moves hundreds of hungry men just so that he might have sex. It goes beyond selfishness yet oddly represents the entire death camp process—all done for ideas held by a handful of men. The general response to the Nazi challenge cannot be a loss of faith (every character in the story that loses faith dies like Meir Katz) but a reinvention of humanity. As Wiesel has said elsewhere, "in a world of absurdity, we must invent reason, we must create beauty out of nothingness."

**Characters**

**A-7713**
See Eliezer Wiesel

**Alphonse**
In the concentration camps, the best heads of the block to be under are Jews. When Elie is transferred to the musicians' block, he finds himself under a German Jew named Alphonse "with an extraordinarily aged face." Whenever possible, Alphonse would organize a cauldron of soup for the weaker ones in the block.

**Akiba Drumer**
Akiba Drumer was a deeply religious elder whose "deep, solemn voice" sang Hasidic melodies. He would attempt to reassure those around him. He interpreted the camps as God's test for his people that they might finally dominate the Satan within. And if God "punishes us relentlessly, it's a sign that He loves us all the more." At one point he discovers a bible verse which, interpreted through numerology, predicted their deliverance to be a few weeks away.

Eventually he can no longer rationalize the horror of the camps with such logic. Finally, he is "selected"—but he was already dead. As soon as he had lost his faith, "he had wandered among us, his eyes glazed, telling everyone of his weakness...." He asks them to say the Khaddish for him in three days—the approximate time until his death. They promise to do so, but they forget.

**Franek**
The foreman in the electrical warehouse is a former student from Warsaw named Franek. He terrorizes Eliezer's father when Eliezer refuses to give up his gold crown. Eventually he gives in. A famous dentist takes out the crown with a rusty spoon. With the crown, Franek becomes kinder and even gives them extra soup when he can.

**Hersch Genud**
An elder who conversed with Akiba Drumer about the camps as a trial for the people was Hersch Genud. He was "well versed in the cabbala [and] spoke of the end of the world and the coming Messiah."

**Idek**
Idek is a Kapo, a prisoner put in charge of a barracks. Under his charge is Eliezer's block and all who work in the electrical warehouse. He is prone to violent fits; people try to stay out of his way. One Sunday, he takes the prisoners under his charge to the warehouse for the day so he can be with a woman. Eliezer discovers them and is whipped. Then he is warned to never reveal what he saw.
Juliek
Juliek, along with Chlomo and Moshe the Beadle, is one of the most important characters in the novel. He is "a bespectacled Pole with a cynical smile on his pale face." He kindly explains what to do and what not to do on the block, including a word of warning about the Idek, "the Kapo." Juliek is also a symbol of the artistry and talent lost in the Holocaust. He was a violinist.

When they were all run to Gleiwitz and away from the approaching Russians, they were quickly and brutally shoved into barracks, heaped in and left to struggle out of a mass of bodies. In this mess, Elie and Juliek hear each other's voice. Juliek is "OK" but he worries for his violin which he has carried with him. At this moment Elie feels himself very close to death when he hears "[t]he sound of a violin, in this dark shed, where the dead were heaped on the living. What madman could be playing the violin here, at the brink of his own grave?" It was Juliek, and he was playing Beethoven—a German composer. In the morning he was dead.

Meir Katz
Meir Katz is a farmer who used to bring fresh vegetables to the Wiesels. He was put in charge of the wagon taking them to Buchenwald because he was the most vigorous. He saves Eliezer from strangulation. He confides to Chlomo that he can't go on. Chlomo tries to bolster him, but at Buchenwald, Meir Katz does not leave the wagon with them.

Louis
Louis was a violinist from Holland who complained that "they would not let him play Beethoven: Jews were not allowed to play German music."

Moshe the Beadle
The first person we meet in the novel is the "physically awkward" Moshe the Beadle. He is poor, but the community is fond of him and does not resent the generosity he needs. To Eliezer he becomes something of an uncle and tutor. He gently initiates Eliezer into the mystical side of Hasidism—something he asked his father about, but he was told to stick with the Talmud. "Moshe the Beadle, the poor barefoot of Sighet, talked to me for long hours of the revelations and mysteries of the cabbala." Moshe the Beadel is a man without means and, therefore, no investments to safeguard except the people.

When the foreign Jews are deported, Eliezer says goodbye to Moshe. Later, Moshe returns with a report on the massacre of those deported. The community dismisses him as a madman. They dismiss him because if he is to be believed, then they too will be as poor as he is. When the SS arrive to cordon off the Jews into a ghetto and then deport them, Moshe says he tried to warn them. Then he flees.

A pipel is a young boy servant of Oberkapo (a prisoner put in charge of several barracks) and often used as a sex slave. One pipel in particular was the servant of a beloved Oberkapo who had been killed when he was found hiding weapons for the camp resistance. The pipel refused to give information under torture. He was hanged before all the prisoners. The normal executioner refused to be involved so three SS took over. It is a horrific execution since the boy was too light to die by his own weight. He struggled for hours at the end of the rope, "That night the soup tasted of corpses."

Madame Schächter
An older woman, Madame Schächter, is huddled in a corner of the wagon with her ten-year-old son. She was a "quiet woman with tense, burning eyes." Her husband and two eldest sons had already been taken. On the first day of the journey to Auschwitz, she went out of her mind. She moaned, asked where her family was, and then she became hysterical. At night she would shriek "I can see fire!" Her shrieks would come suddenly and terrify everyone. But she did see fire. The last time she shrieked and everyone looked, they saw the flames of the crematory.
Stein
Reizel Stein's husband from Antwerp seeks out Chlomo among the new arrivals at Auschwitz for news of his family. He has not seen them since 1940. Eliezer is faster than his father to recall the man as a relative. He lies and says that his mother has heard from Reizel. This gives Stein great joy. But then, after another train arrives, Stein learns the truth and stops coming round to visit.

Tibi
Representing the political opposite of the Hasidic elders who preached nonviolence and patience, were two brothers named Tibi and Yossi. They believed in the precepts of Zionism, a political pressure movement active mostly in Europe to convince the world powers to create a Jewish state of Israel in the area of Palestine. They were Jews from Czechoslovakia whose parents had been exterminated at Birkenau. "They lived body and soul for each other." They befriend Eliezer with whom they share the regret that their parents had not gone to Palestine while there was still time to do so. The two boys taught Eliezer Hebrew chants while they worked.

Chlomo Wiesel
Eliezer's father, Chlomo, is a "cultured, rather unsentimental man … more concerned with others than with his own family." He is held in great esteem by the community and symbolizes Abraham. As Abraham however, he refuses to sacrifice his son. He lives, while in the death camps, to try and keep his son alive. Eliezer, as a representation of Isaac, also safeguards his father. This relationship is the most important of the story. The bitterest moment comes when Clomo believes himself selected and gives Eliezer his inheritance—a knife and spoon.

They have done well together until the end, when they are shipped to Gleiwitz, and then taken to Buchenwald. They are transported in open cars (despite the snow) with the result that Chlomo comes down with dysentery. Eliezer does all he can to comfort his father. He begins to resent the burden. He is tempted to take his father's ration but does not. The resentment he feels for his father haunts him. The haunting grows worse when Chlomo begins yelling to Eliezer for water. A guard silences him with a blow from a truncheon. At some point, Chlomo is taken away to the crematory still breathing. Eliezer could only stand by.

Eliezer Wiesel
The narrating survivor of the camps is Eliezer, who became A-7713. Deeply fascinated by Hasidic Judaism he finds an indulgent teacher in Moshe the Beadle. The first cracks in his faith begin, however, when Moshe returns from deportation changed in demeanor and warning about impending doom. The cracks widen inside with every night spent in the camps. The crack is not exactly a rejection of God; it is a dismissal shouted out in anger. "Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my Soul and turned my dreams to dust." But such moments passed and his argument is in keeping with Hasidism. Rather, his alteration takes this form, "I no longer accepted God's silence."

Eliezer had once believed profoundly and had lamented before God, but he could no longer do so. He "felt very strong" in this realization for he "had ceased to be anything but ashes, yet I felt myself to be stronger than the Almighty." Eliezer is henceforth, except for a few moments of doubt, determined to live as a man (a being made of dust) and survive—"something within me revolted against death." Eliezer may no longer believe in the merciful and just God, but he believes even less in giving into death by concentration camp madness.

Eliezer represents a truly aesthetic individual who represents the best of European civilization. He is aware of the myths of his people and their history. As such he is able to tell his tale in terms of them with references to psalms, gospel stories, and personages like Job and indirectly Abraham, Isaac, and the three children in the furnace. He is truly mystified to account for the camps both in terms of religion but also morality. Consequently, he is bent solely on survival, and only his stomach takes note of time. Still he survives but merely as a corpse in a mirrored gaze just waking up from the long night.
Yossi
The brother of Tibi and friend of Elie while they all lived in the musician's block.

Critical Essays: Analysis

In a symposium published in *Judaism* (March 26, 1967), Wiesel declared, “In the beginning there was the Holocaust. We must therefore start over again.” Most commentators would agree with Graham Walker’s description, in his book *Elie Wiesel: A Challenge to Theology* (1987), of the Holocaust as an event of “ontological status which has disrupted both human history and the life story of God.” *Night* is one of only a few books whose authors attempt to understand the Holocaust. Wiesel’s international status as the winner of the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize, as a formidable literary figure, and as one of the leading voices speaking for the Holocaust survivors as well as the victims makes this work all the more compelling. His decision to focus on the Holocaust’s significance for altering the human understanding of man’s relationship to God indicates that Wiesel’s views, as expressed in *Night* and in virtually every work of his since, reflect the central difficulties involved in the painful theological revisions that have occurred in both Jewish and Christian realms since 1945.

It is important to realize, however, that *Night* is not an example of the “death of God theology.” At the Brandeis-Bardin Institute (January 22, 1978), Wiesel claimed that “the Covenant was broken. I had to tell God of my anger. I still do so.” God is not dead for Wiesel; in fact, it is the recognition of a God that permits the monologue recorded in *Night*. Wiesel can protest vehemently to God about the state of the creation precisely because God the Creator exists.

Paradoxically, Wiesel also employs silence within this monologue. While Wiesel believes that to remain silent about the Holocaust is to betray its victims, he also knows that presuming to talk about the experience of the Holocaust is a betrayal of another kind. His words are thus chosen with extreme care, but also with a great regard for the silence between the words. In an interview with Harry James Cargas in *U.S. Catholic* (September, 1971), Wiesel observed that “there are certain silences between word and word. . . . This is the silence that I have tried to put in my work.”

Although Wiesel’s words and silences are intended for all readers, Jewish and non-Jewish, Hasidic Judaism and culture shaped and still influence the man. Writing in *Jewish Heritage* (1972), Wiesel attests: I myself love Hasidism because I grew up in a Hasidic milieu. Whenever I want to write something good, I go back to my childhood. The soul of every writer is his childhood, and mine was a Hasidic one. I love Hasidism because of its tales, because of the intrinsic fervor that makes them Hasidic tales. I love Hasidism for something else too: it contains all the themes that haunt my work.

Although Wiesel’s Judaism is deeply ingrained, *Night* does not offer an uncritical view of the behavior of Jews in the face of murderous Nazi intentions. Illusion reigns for Jews in Hungary and Sighet, even with SS soldiers in their midst. No one can think the unthinkable; even the eyewitness account of a Jew who escaped from a death camp is discounted as the ravings of a madman. A woman driven to insanity while on the train heading to Auschwitz (and death) is silenced; her visions of flames and terror are ridiculed—until the sights of the death camp’s huge chimneys loom near. A pie waits to be baked in the ghetto, sudden deportation having removed the family that hoped to enjoy it. Wiesel’s father advises his loved ones not to fear wearing the Star of David as ordered by the SS; it cannot kill you, he argues. Wiesel asks rhetorically, retrospectively, “Poor Father! Of what then did you die?”

Nevertheless, Wiesel believes that a defining mark of Judaism has been its willingness to question. Robert McAfee Brown notes that at the center of Wiesel’s work has been the urgent question of how mankind should “respond to monstrous moral evil.” In *Night*, Wiesel asks why he should honor the name of the God who has
done nothing about the existence of the death camp Auschwitz and relates this question of theodicy to the suffering experienced by the Jews. Concerned primarily with the “defiance of suffering,” Wiesel points out in the Cargas interview that “suffering as a virtue is alien to Judaism” because “suffering is impure.” Ultimately, suffering is not to be experienced as an end or as a means to some transcendent value.

The absence of transcendent affirmation in Night involves the creation of a new kind of protagonist—not the tragic hero of past literatures but the survivor, the sufferer. As Terrence Des Pres argues in The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps (1976), the survivor chooses life, even on the unbearable terms of the persecutor, rather than death, which might redeem or ennoble him in the eyes of his audience. For Wiesel, survival, even with its terrible burden of guilt, denies the perpetrators a victory and allows the survivor’s testimony to be handed on to posterity.

**Critical Essays: Critical Context**

In Against Silence: The Voice and Vision of Elie Wiesel (1984), Irving Abrahamson asserts that Night is not merely the first work by Wiesel. Indeed, it is the center of all that follows: Night contains all the haunting issues permeating Wiesel’s later works. Wiesel has spoken of Night as surrounded concentrically by his later books. Although Night is his only effort exclusively concerned with the Holocaust, the universe of the concentration camp is central to all of his work.

Lawrence Langer, in Versions of Survival: The Holocaust and the Human Spirit (1982), has argued that language to describe annihilation has yet to be devised. Literary categories that sufficed as intellectual frameworks prior to Auschwitz no longer apply. Most historians, theologians, and critics believe that Auschwitz has generated a unique class of writers. If so, the attendant literature of atrocity is operating in uncharted intellectual and moral terrain. Nevertheless, Night’s extraordinary power cannot be denied. All the forces that operated within the Holocaust—perpetrators, victims, bystanders—are represented in this slim volume under the scrutiny of a keenly perceptive narrator who sees these forces within the framework of a kind of receding universe. He gives no assurances about what will replace this world.

Wiesel’s Night records this destruction of the old order—the inherited past, faith in humanity, belief in the God of the covenant with Abraham and the God of Sinai—and questions the implied nature of the emerging new order based on totalitarian misrule, the industrialized debasement of humanity, and the worthlessness of women, the elderly, and innocent children. A few critics found parts of Night steeped in bathos or mawkishness, but such negative views were extremely rare. Wiesel was not writing from the narrative perspective of a Henry James or a James Joyce: Having stood within feet of a burning pit filled with infants and small children, Wiesel did not find it useful to write with Olympian detachment. The influence of Franz Kafka and Albert Camus (whom Wiesel knew during his days in Paris as a journalist) is reflected in Wiesel’s portrayal of the madness and absurdity of Auschwitz and in his commitment to producing literature that might help improve the human condition through appealing to conscience.

In the final analysis, Night is significant as a clear record of mankind’s confrontation with the darkness of an overwhelming evil that operated on a vast scale in the twentieth century and which cut viciously to the core of known historical, social, humanitarian, and religious dynamics. The absolute darkness of the night that descended for all time on the six million Jewish victims will not, Wiesel argues, leave untouched anyone born after the Holocaust.

**Critical Essays: Critical Evaluation**

Night, the first novel of Elie Wiesel’s trilogy on Holocaust concentration camp survivors, is an autobiographical novel that records the author’s own long night of captivity in the Nazi death camps during
World War II. Like Eliezer, the novel’s narrator, Wiesel was forced from his own village into Auschwitz, became separated from his mother and sisters, witnessed his father’s slow decline and death, and was eventually liberated at the end of the war.

Although the powerful tale told in Night is deeply personal, Eliezer’s narrative can also be viewed as the story of all European Jews who suffered during the reign of Adolf Hitler. When Eliezer admonishes the Jews of Sighet for their refusal to heed the warnings of Moshe the Beadle, when he questions why his fellow Jewish citizens passively follow the orders of their German captors, when he asks why God lets thousands of Jews be put to death Eliezer becomes a Jewish Everyman struggling in anguish to understand the most troubling chapter in his people’s history.

The process by which Eliezer begins to doubt God and eventually lose his faith reflects the experience of many Jews during and after the Holocaust. Seeing three concentration camp inmates hanging from a gallows, Eliezer reasons that God, too, has been hanged. During a Rosh Hashanah prayer ceremony, Eliezer asks why he should bless God: “Because He had had thousands of children burned in His pits? Because He kept six crematories working night and day, on Sundays and feast days? Because in his great might He had created Auschwitz?”

Eliezer’s story is a cruel reversal of Exodus, the Old Testament epic of liberation and triumph. It is during the feast of Passover, when Jews celebrate the passing of the Angel of Death over their homes and their subsequent liberation from Egypt, that German soldiers begin arresting the Jewish leaders of Sighet. Exodus records the journey of God’s chosen people toward a promised land provided by God; Night depicts the journey of a people selected for extermination entering into an oppressive captivity in the Nazi death camps. In the face of their trials, the chosen people of Exodus had united; on the other hand, the Jews depicted in Night often turn on one another, fighting, and even killing for food. To Wiesel, Hitler’s Holocaust nullifies the triumph of Exodus. The Jews of Wiesel’s time are faithless, despairing survivors of a long night of captivity; they are not fulfilled travelers who have reached their promised land.

Eliezer’s camp is liberated at the end of Night, but he does not believe that freedom has been provided by the God of Exodus. Buchenwald is freed only when the camp’s resistance movement takes up arms against its Nazi captors. The symbol of freedom is an American tank arriving at Buchenwald’s gates. Eliezer is no longer a captive at the end of the novel, but Wiesel offers no hint of any physical or spiritual rebirth. The novel’s final image is of Eliezer looking into a mirror and seeing a corpse stare back at him. Night is the tale of painful death, not of liberation and rebirth.

The narrating of this harrowing tale presented problems for its author. Wiesel, indeed any writer who tries to depict the horrors of the Holocaust, has to put into words a sequence of terrible events that can never be adequately rendered in language. No description of the Nazi death camps, no matter how skillfully and realistically narrated, can fully depict the terrors that millions of people experienced during World War II. Wiesel and other Holocaust survivors nevertheless felt compelled to record their stories for their contemporaries and for history, and in its plot, characterization, and prose strategies Night is a literary work of the highest order.

Wiesel narrates the events of his captivity in a series of vignettes suited to the story of separation, annihilation, and loss. Few of Wiesel’s characters are substantially developed; Eliezer and his father are the novel’s only well-rounded characters. This strategy is, however, well suited for a book that deals with the marginalization, suppression, and elimination of individuals. Wiesel’s prose style is terse and often understated. Eliezer rarely editorializes in Night; he prefers to tell his story in lean, taut prose, allowing the events of the novel to speak for themselves.
Wiesel continued to explore the lives of Holocaust survivors in *L’Aube* (1960; *Dawn*, 1961) and *Le Jour* (1961; *The Accident*, 1962), the next two novels in the trilogy begun with *Night*, and in more than a dozen subsequent novels, nonfiction works, and plays. With *Night*, Wiesel became a spokesperson for all those who suffered during Hitler’s reign. He was one of the first Holocaust survivors to record his experiences, and he made the rest of the world aware of the horrors that had been perpetrated by Hitler in his campaign to exterminate European Jewry. In 1986, Wiesel received the Nobel Peace Prize for serving as a “messenger to mankind” and as “one of our most important spiritual leaders and guides.”

**Critical Essays: Critical Overview**

The reception of *Night* has remained consistent. The book did not fetch a high price, and the criticism upon its publication was favorable but superficial. Reviewers were quick to empathize with the narrative but offered nothing in the way of critique or constructive engagement.

As time passed, however, critics like Simon P. Sibelman have approached the work as an ethical treatise demanding reflection. They have begun to ask Wiesel's question, “What is the state of our morality at the dawn of the next century?” Critics have also grappled with how Wiesel accomplished what many said couldn't be done—transcribe the horror of the holocaust into literary form. Thus, while Wiesel's book makes no distinguishing claim between art and life, a few critics have explored what has come to be known as the Holocaust aesthetic. Most reviews suggest the novel as compulsory for anyone concerned about civilization. Few want to accept it for what it is, a gentle voice of reason asking us to never allow the Holocaust to recur.

W. H. Hager's review for the *Christian Century* is typical of early reviews. Hager says blandly, "... it is a personal record of a child's experience. As such it should be given a place beside Anne Frank's diary.... The worst tragedy is always the death of God in the human soul and when we see it happen to a child who has come face to face with man's evil inhumanity to man we are made to know how dark the night of the soul can be. There are unforgettable moments—like that when the Polish Juliek plays Beethoven among the corpses." Already, he was repeating what had been said in the August, 1960, issue of *Kirkus*. There the review made an "inevitable comparison with Anne Frank."

*The New Yorker* repeated the norm but offered a little more insight in its March 18, 1961, issue: "The author's style is precise and brief; he catches a person or a scene in a sentence. He lacks self-pity but not self-awareness.” Nothing, however, was said about other semantic aspects like Wiesel's use of silence and white space.

Not all early reviews were unimaginative. Robert Alter, in "Elie Wiesel: Between Hangman and Victim," notes the role of mystical Hasidism in the story. He also declares that *Night* is only the beginning—the factual grounding—for a man whose "imaginative courage ... endows [his] factually precise writing with a hallucinated more-than-realmism: [Wiesel] is able to confront the horror with a nakedly self-exposed honesty rare even among writers who went through the same ordeal."

Alter then goes on to compare Wiesel's imaginative landscape with the lyric love poetry of John Donne. This is a refreshing occurrence where one would expect to see a reference to Anne Frank. Alter perceives lyric love poetry as a likely predecessor to Wiesel's work. In his interpretation, lyric love poetry was the last time writers were so focused on the minutiae of, in their case, the lover and beloved. Alter contends that Wiesel is minutely focused on the relationship between executioners, victims, and spectators.

"Wiesel has been considered the chief novelist of the holocaust ... [because he] succeeded in blending Jewish philosophy, mythology, and historical experience," said Lothar Kahn in "Elie Wiesel: Neo-Hasidism" (1968). In the late 1970s, Wiesel's work was assessed in the 1978 book by Rosenfeld and Greenberg entitled
Confronting the Holocaust. Michael Berenbaum explored the trial of faith that Eliezer witnessed in his *The Vision of the Void: Theological Reflections on the Works of Elie Wiesel*

In 1982, Ellen S. Fine published a study of the novella *Legacy of Night; The Literary Universe of Elie Wiesel*. Keeping with Wiesel, Fine does not draw lines between life and literature. Her book is about the Holocaust, primarily Elie Wiesel's Holocaust. "The thrust of Wiesel's writing does not lie in his literary techniques and he has openly rejected the notion of art for art's sake. He is basically a storyteller with something to say." Being a storyteller has made him a good lecturer and spokesman. Fine argues that taken together, Wiesel's fiction forms a whole work with repeated and varied motifs. His work tells a continuous story of a survivor with memories.

D. L. Vanderwerken's essay explored the traditional genre of bildungsroman and its relationship to Wiesel's work. In his "Wiesel *Night* as Antibildungsroman," he makes comparisons with writers like Saul Bellow and Ralph Ellison to show how Eliezer is part of a new fictional hero development. This new hero is worldly to start with, discovers a more devastating wisdom, and is not even happy to be left alive at the end.

The most recent book-length analysis of Wiesel's fiction is Simon P. Sibelman's *Silence in the Novels of Elie Wiesel*. There he presents Wiesel as a navi, a prophet, who speaks in order to move others "to review the course of life [and, thereby,] redefine the human condition." Sibleman spends a good deal of the book showing how Wiesel's techniques work toward this end. He discusses how Wiesel uses the semantics of page layout to add to the sense-blank pages and paragraphs made up of one short sentence.

*Night* remains one of the most powerful literary expressions of the Holocaust. It has been responsible for sharing the Holocaust with millions of people who then register their reaction to the bleak, horrific events in the novel. The novel continues to question the role of literature in our society—a society still dealing with the memory of the Holocaust.

**Essays and Criticism: Themes of Faith and Disbelief**

Elie Wiesel's *Night* was first published in an English translation in 1960; it is a slightly fictionalized account of Wiesel's experiences as a concentration camp survivor. His first attempt to write about his experiences was written in Yiddish and contained some eight hundred pages; the English translation of the French version of those experiences, *Night*, is less than a hundred and fifty pages. It is episodic in structure, with only a few key scenes in each chapter serving to illustrate the themes of the work. One of the most important of these themes is faith, and specifically Eliezer's struggle to retain his faith in God, in himself, in humanity, and in words themselves, in spite of the disbelief, degradation and destruction of the concentration camp universe.

*Night* opens in 1943, during a time when Hungary's Jews were still largely untouched by the horrors of the Holocaust. It begins with a description of Moshe the Beadle, who is instructing the pious young Eliezer in the mysteries of the cabbala, Jewish mysticism. Ehezer's education is interrupted when Moshe is deported with the other foreign-born Jews of Sighet. Moshe returns to Sighet with an almost unbelievable story: all the Jews with whom he was deported have been massacred. The villagers react with disbelief; they denounce him as a madman. As Ora Avni writes, this first episode of *Night* reminds the reader of the perils of disbelief.

Wiesel, the writer, occupies the same position as Moshe is the story: he is telling stories that are too horrible to be believed, and yet they are true. As Lucy Dawidowicz writes, "To comprehend the strange and unfamiliar, the human mind proceeds from the reality of experience by applying reason, logic, and analogy…. The Jews, in their earliest encounters with the anti-Jewish policies of Hitler's Germany, saw their situation as a retro version of their history, but in their ultimate experience with the Final Solution, historical experience … failed them as explanation."
The Jews of Sighet cannot believe Moshe's stories because nothing in their experience has prepared them for the knowledge that the very fact of their existence is punishable by death. His warnings go unheeded, even after the Fascists come to power in Hungary, even after German troops appear in Sighet, even after two Jewish ghettos are created, then rapidly liquidated, right up until the moment the last group of Jews from Sighet arrives at Birkenau. It is only as they disembark from the train, aware of the smell of burning flesh, that they recognize the consequences of their disbelief; faith in Moshe's stories might have given them the impetus to flee, to hide, or to resist before it was too late.

_Night_ has been described as a "negative Bildungsroman," a coming-of-age story in which, rather than finding his identity as a young hero would typically do, Eliezer progressively loses his identity throughout the course of the narrative. This identity-disintegration is experienced individually and collectively and symbolized in the early parts of the text by the loss of possessions. After the Jews of Sighet learn that they are to be deported, they abandon religious objects in the backyard of Eliezer's family. Later, while they are waiting to be deported, they are forced to relieve themselves on the floor of their own holy place, the synagogue.

Judaism, the shared faith in the special Jewish covenant with God which sustains Eliezer and his community, is one of the things which the villagers are forced to give up; indeed, their religion is what has marked them to be condemned. Nothing in Eliezer's religious studies has prepared him for the sight of children being burned alive in pits, a sight made all the more horrific for readers by our knowledge of his own youth and the youth of his sister Tzipora, from whom he has just been separated forever. Wiesel writes, in a now-famous passage:

"Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky. Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever. Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never."

Eliezer's faith in himself, in God and in humanity has been consumed, and the horror of this annihilation is underscored by the way Wiesel structures this passage; in its repetition, it is like a prayer. Simon Sibelman writes that "Wiesel composes a new psalm, one which reflects the negativity of Auschwitz and the eclipse of God."

The religious traditions of Judaism then, are both inadequate to comprehend the existence of Auschwitz and almost impossible to practice there. The men in the camp debate whether or not the observances of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, required of them by the Jewish covenant with God, are still required after God has betrayed them by breaking that covenant. Eliezer describes eating on Yom Kippur, traditionally a day of fasting and atonement for sins, as an act of defiance against a God in whose mercy he no longer believes. Yet he feels a great emptiness within him, as his identity, and thus his humanity, has depended on his membership in the Jewish community, a community which is being destroyed around him. He writes of meeting his father on Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, a day when his disbelief makes him feel alone in the universe:

"I ran off to look for my father. And at the same time I was afraid of having to wish him a Happy New Year when I no longer believed it.

He was standing near the wall, bowed down, his shoulders sagging as though beneath a heavy burden. I went up to him, took his hand and kissed it. A tear fell upon it. Whose was that tear? Mine? His? I said nothing. Nor did he. We had never understood each other so clearly."
In this passage, Eliezer silently shares his grief with his father; the horrors of Auschwitz have stripped their holiest holidays of all meaning and the loss is grievous to them both. Yet at other times, Wiesel suggests that faith is crucial to surviving in the concentration camp. Akiba Drumer, who had been so devout, makes the conscious decision to die after he loses his faith. Meir Katz, who had been so strong, is broken by his loss of faith and dies on the last night of the transport to Buchenwald. Wiesel has written elsewhere that "it is permissible for man to accuse God, provided it be done in the name of faith in God." In other words, Eliezer's ability to argue with God, as he learned during his study of the cabbala, is itself a kind of faith in God, a faith that helps him to survive the camps.

Faith is the cornerstone of a relationship with God; it is also the cornerstone of Eliezer's relationships with others, which in turn give him a sense of his own identity. It is shared faith in God which binds the Jews of Sighet together, and it is faith in each other which makes those relationships viable and strong.

The most important relationship in Night, and one which illustrates the power of faith and of disbelief, is Eliezer's relationship with his father. After the two are separated from the rest of their family, Eliezer's only thought is not to lose his father. Several times in the story, Eliezer saves his father's life, sometimes risking his own, as he does when he rescues his father from the line of men who have been condemned. As Ted Estess writes, "Eliezer makes only one thing necessary to him: absolute fidelity to his father. God has broken His covenant, His promises to His people; Eliezer, in contrast, determines … not to violate his covenant with his father." Yet Eliezer is haunted by a desire to abandon his father, and is filled with doubts about his own ability to keep the covenant between them. He is given contradictory advice by two veterans of Auschwitz; one tells the newly-arrived men that they must band together in order to survive, while another tells Eliezer that he is better off without worrying about anyone but himself.

Night contains many scenes where fathers and sons are separated, where the son turns on the father or abandons him. Rabbi Eliahou's faith in his son's love has kept him alive, and thus Eliezer is thankful that he has not revealed that Rabbi Eliahou's son has deliberately abandoned him. He also prays to ask for the strength never to do what Rabbi Eliahou's son has done. When Eliezer's father dies, he feels relief, yet Wiesel writes nothing of Eliezer's time in Buchenwald after the death of his father, because Eliezer feels that he himself has died. Wiesel suggests that though the guards pit loved ones against each other, wanting to impose a system of "every man for himself," the men must find the strength to have faith in each other and in their own ability to resist this almost inexorable pressure. As Ellen Fine writes, "to care for another shows the persistence of self is a system principally designed to annihilate the self."

Eliezer's silence, which occurs when his father dies, symbolizes his virtual death. Language is the underpinning of human relationships, and is itself bound up in notions of faith and disbelief. Martin Buber writes that "language … represents communion, communication, and community," and communication through language depends on faith in shared experiences and concepts. Wiesel asserts that the only word that still has meaning at Auschwitz is "furnace," because the smell of burning flesh makes it real. The other words, then, have lost their meanings, symbolized by the sign proclaiming that "Work Means Freedom."

In fact, at Auschwitz, work means a slower death than that inflicted on those who were killed immediately. A "doctor" is someone, like Dr. Mengele, who selects people for death rather than saving them from it. A "son" can kill, rather than respect, his father. Like prayer, words themselves are perverted in the concentration camp universe, and Eliezer loses faith in their ability to achieve communion with God, to communicate with others, or to bind people together in a community. His last loss of faith is his loss of faith in words themselves, which causes him to withdraw into silence and disrupts the narrative itself.

Wiesel's writings after Night have been attempts to reclaim faith in language, in humanity, in God, and in himself. In Night, faith seems an incredible burden, a hindrance to survival, and yet it remains the only way in which the Jews can survive the horrors of the Holocaust. In the context of the concentration camp universe,
Wiesel suggests that the only thing more dangerous than faith is disbelief.

**Source:** Jane Elizabeth Dougherty, in an essay for *Novels for Students*, Gale, 1998. Dougherty is a doctoral candidate in English at Tufts University.

**Essays and Criticism: Historical Horror and the Shape of Night**

What follows is an attempt to study the ways in which a traumatic historical experience shapes narrative in a powerful example of this genre, Eli Wiesel's *Night*. It is my conviction that in groping toward formal and literary understanding of such texts, we move closer to the human meanings that the violent world we live in has all but erased.

To render historical horror is to render, by definition, that which exceeds rendering, it projects pain for which there is no solace, no larger consolation, no redemptive possibility. The implications, both formal and aesthetic, for such a rendering are critical. The great tragedies negotiate exactly such a balance. King Lear's terrible journey from blindness to insight brings him reunion with loyal Cordelia even as he loses her and the restoration of the Kingdom is not far behind. The young Eliezer staring into the mirror upon his liberation from Buchenwald has also gained knowledge, but this knowledge in no way justifies the sufferings that preceeded it. It is not a sign of positive spiritual development. Nor is it linked to restorative changes in the moral and political realm. *Night* is not about a moral political order violated and restored, but about the shattering of the idea of such an order.

It is clear enough that in comparing *King Lear* and Wiesel's *Night* we do violence to both. But the juxtaposition throws light on a crucial aesthetic issue. It helps us define the experience of a work like *Night* and moves our inquiry in the direction of the specific means by which the writer shapes that experience.

Lear's death is the death of an old man, flawed like ourselves, vulnerable like ourselves, a character with whom a powerful emotional transaction and bonds of identification have been established over the course of the play. In Lear's death we reexperience the tragic dimensions of our own experience. The play articulates, in symbolic form, an existential pain we could hardly afford to articulate ourselves. But it is pain that, no matter how great, is contained, since the very act of its symbolic articulation also gives form, and therefore limits or boundaries, to that pain.

*Night* proceeds from experience that is not universal. It does not expand from kernels of the familiar but from the unfamiliar, from data in historical reality. The deaths of Eliezer's father, of Akiva Drummer, of Juliek the violinist and of Meir Katz are different because, after all of the pain, there is nothing to be extracted by way of compensation. They are not symbolic but very real, and we experience, not a purging of feelings tapped but the fear of the unpredictable in life to which we, like the Jews of *Night*, are subject.

If symbol is something that stands in place of something else, the historical narrative does not stand in place of our experience, but alongside it. We experience historical narrative much the way we experience a neighbor's report of his or her visit to a place we have not ourselves visited. The report is informational—it is "adjacent" to our experience, neither interpretive nor metaphorical nor symbolic. It is "other" than our experience but also part of the same historical matrix within which we experience the flow of our own lives. *Night* threatens and disturbs in a way that symbolic narrative does not.

*Night* is Wiesel's attempt to bring word of the death camps back to humanity in such a form that his message, unlike that of Moshe the Beadle to Eliezer and to the Jews of Sighet, will not be rejected. The word I wish to stress here is *form*. The work, which is eyewitness account, is also much more than eyewitness account. In its
rhetorical and aesthetic design, *Night* is shaped by the problematic of historical horror and by the resistances, both psychic and formal, to the knowledge Wiesel would convey.

When the narrator, Eliezer, sees a lorry filled with children who are dumped into a fiery ditch, he cannot believe what he has seen: "I pinched my face. Was I alive? Was I awake? I could not believe it. How could it be possible for them to burn people, children, and for the world to keep silent? No, none of this could be true. It was a nightmare."

Eliezer cannot believe what is before his eyes. His disbelief seems to numb him physically—he pinches his face to ascertain that the medium of that vision, his body, is alive, perceiving, present. So fundamental is the horror to which he is an eyewitness that seeing comes at the expense of his bodily awareness of himself as a vital and perceiving entity. What Eliezer witnesses contradicts psychic underpinnings of existence so thoroughly that his very awareness brings with it feelings of deadness.

It is precisely this moment, this confrontation with data that negates the human impulses and ideas that structure our lives, with which Wiesel is concerned. We cannot know that which we cannot know. In order to bring the fact of Auschwitz to us, Wiesel must deal with the inherent difficulty of assimilating the truth he would portray.

His method is simple, brilliant and depends upon a series of repetitions in which what is at stake is a breakdown of critical illusions. At this level, the experience of the reader reading the narrative is structurally parallel to his experience of life, at least as Karl Popper describes it. Life, in Popper's view,

> resembles the experience of a blind person who runs into an obstacle and thereby experiences its existence. Through the falsification of our assumptions we actually make contact with "reality." The refutation of our errors is the positive experience we gain from reality. [Toward an Aesthetic of Reception, 1982]

Eliezer's tale is the story of a series of shattered expectations, his and our own. The repetition of this "disappointment," of optimism proven hollow and warnings rejected, becomes the crucial aesthetic fact or condition within which we then experience the narrator's account of his experiences in Auschwitz, in Buna, in Gleiwitz, and in Buchenwald. In this way we come to experience the account of the death camps as an account cleansed of past illusion, pristine in its terrible truth.

The quest for this truth is established at the outset of the narrative in the figure of Moshe the Beadle. Eliezer is devoted to his studies of Talmud. His decision to study Kabbalah with Moshe focuses the narrative on the problematic of reality and imbues it with the spiritual longings of this quest.

> There are a thousand and one gates leading into the orchard of mystical truth. Every human being has his own gate….

And Moshe the Beadle, the poor barefoot of Signet, talked to me for long hours of the revelations and mysteries of the cabbala. It was with him that my initiation began. We would read together, ten times over, the same page of the Zohar. Not to learn it by heart, but to extract the divine essence from it.

> And throughout those evenings a conviction grew in me that Moshe the Beadle would draw me with him into eternity, into that time where question and answer would become one.

The book, which begins with Eliezer's search for a teacher of mystical knowledge and ends with Eliezer's contemplating his image in a mirror after his liberation from Buchenwald, proposes a search for ultimate
knowledge in terms that are traditional, while the knowledge it offers consists of data that is historical, radical, and subversive.

If directionality of the narrative is established early, a counter-direction makes itself felt very quickly. Following Eliezer's dream of a formal harmony, eternity and oneness toward which Moshe would take him, Eliezer's initiation into the "real" begins:

Then one day they expelled all the foreign Jews from Sighet. And Moshe the Beadle was a foreigner.

Crammed into cattle trains by Hungarian police, they wept bitterly. We stood on the platform and wept too.

Moshe is shot but escapes from a mass grave in one of the Galician forests of Poland near Kolomaye and returns to Sighet in order to warn the Jews there. He describes children used as targets for machine guns and the fate of a neighbor, Malka, and of Tobias the tailor.

From this point onward in the narrative, a powerful counter-direction of flight away from truth, knowledge, reality, and history is set into motion. Moshe is not believed, not even by his disciple, Eliezer. The Jews of Sighet resist the news Moshe has brought them:

I wanted to come back to Sighet to tell you the story of my death … And see how it is, no one will listen to me….

And we, the Jews of Sighet, were waiting for better days, which would not be long in coming now.

Yes, we even doubted that he [Hitler] wanted to exterminate us.

Was he going to wipe out a whole people? Could he exterminate a population scattered throughout so many countries? So many millions! What method could he use? And in the middle of the twentieth century"

Optimism persists with the arrival of the Germans. After Sighet is divided into a big and little ghetto, Wiesel writes, "little by little life returned to normal. The barbed wire which fenced us in did not cause us any real fear."

While the narrative presses simultaneously toward and away from the "real," the real events befalling the Jews of Sighet are perceived as unreal:

On everyone's back was a pack…. Here came the Rabbi, his back bent, his face shaved, his pack on his back. His mere presence among the deportees added a touch of unreality to the scene. It was like a page torn from some story book, from some historical novel about the captivity of Babylon or the Spanish Inquisition.

The intensity of the resistance peaks in the boxcar in which Eliezer and his family are taken to the death camp. Madame Schachter, distraught by the separation from her pious husband and two older sons, has visions of fire: "Jews, listen to me! I can see a fire! There are huge flames! It is a furnace!" Her words prey on nerves, fan fears, dispel illusion; "We felt that an abyss was about to open beneath our bodies." She is gagged and beaten. As her cries are silenced the chimneys of Auschwitz come into view:
We had forgotten the existence of Madame Schachter. Suddenly we heard terrible screams: Jews, look! Look through the window! Flames! Look!

And as the train stopped, we saw this time that flames were gushing out of a tall chimney into the black sky.

The movement toward and away from the knowledge of historical horror that Moshe the Beadle brings back from the mass grave and the violence that erupts when precious illusions are disturbed, shapes the narrative of Night. The portrait and analysis of the resistances to knowing help situate the reader in relation to the historical narrative and imbue the narrative with the felt historicity of the world outside the book. Eliezer's rejection of the knowledge that Moshe brings back, literally, from the grave, predicts our own rejection of that knowledge. His failure to believe the witness prepares the reader for the reception of Eliezer's own story of his experience in Auschwitz by first examining the defenses that Eliezer, and, thereby, implicitly, the reader, would bring to descriptions of Auschwitz. The rejection of Moshe strips the reader of his own deafness in advance of the arrival at Auschwitz.

Once stripped of his defenses, the reader moves from a fortified, to an open, undefended position vis-a-vis the impact of the narrative. Because the lines between narrative art and life have been erased, Wiesel brings the reader into an existential relationship to the historical experience recounted in Night. By virtue of that relationship, the reader is transformed into a witness. The act of witnessing is ongoing for most of the narrative, a narrative that is rife with horror and with the formal dissonances that historically experienced horror must inflict upon language.

Human extremity challenges all formal representation of it. It brings the world of language and the world outside language into the uncomfortable position of two adjacent notes on a piano keyboard that are simultaneously pressed and held. The sounds they produce jar the ear. In a work of historical horror, language and life, expression and experience are perceived as separate opaque structures, each of which is inadequate to encompass the abyss that separates them.

The most powerful passages in Night are those that mark Eliezer's arrival in Auschwitz. The family is separated. Eliezer and his father go through a selection and manage to stay together. Eliezer watches a truck drop living children into a ditch full of flames. He and his father conclude that this is to be Eliezer's fate as well. Eliezer decides he will run into an electrified wire fence and electrocute himself rather than face an excruciating death in the flaming ditch.

The moment is extraordinary and extreme beyond the wildest of human imaginings. Hearing his fellow Jews murmur the Kaddish, a formula of praise of the Almighty that is the traditional prayer for the dead, Eliezer revolts: "For the first time, I felt revolt rise up in me. Why should I bless His name? The Eternal Lord of the Universe, the All Powerful and Terrible, was silent. What had I to thank Him for?" The Jews continue their march and Eliezer begins to count the steps before he will jump at the wire:

Ten steps still. Eight. Seven. We marched slowly on, as though following a hearse at our own funeral…. There it was now, right in front of us, the pit and its flames. I gathered all that was left of my strength, so that I could break from the ranks and throw myself upon the barbed wire. In the depths of my heart, I bade farewell to my father, to the whole universe

And the words of the Kaddish, hallowed by centuries and disavowed only moments before, words of praise and of affirmation of divine oneness, spring unbidden to his lips: "and in spite of myself, the words formed themselves and issued in a whisper from my lips: Yitgadal veyitkadach shme raba…. May His name be blessed and magnified." Eliezer does not run to the wire. The entire group turns left and enters a barracks.
The question of formal dissonance in Night is revealing. The narrative that would represent historical horror works, finally, against the grain of the reader and of the psychic structures that demand the acknowledgments, resolutions, closure, equivalence, and balances that are enacted in Lear. When Cordelia is killed in Shakespeare's play, Lear's sanity gives way and, finally, his life as well. Holding her lifeless body in his arms Lear cries out against heaven, "Howl, howl, howl! O you men of stone. / Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them. / That heaven's vault should break." [The Complete Works of Shakespeare, 1238] The scene, terrible as it is, formally restores the balance disturbed by Cordelia's murder by virtue of the linguistic energies and dramatic consequences it sets in motion. Those consequences are a terrible acknowledgment of a terrible event. The adequacy of the acknowledgment reconstructs a formal balance even while taking account of the terrible in life.

The words of the Kaddish in Night do not express the horror to which Eliezer is a witness. They flow from an inner necessity and do not reflect but deflect that horror. They project the sacredness of life in the face of its most wrenching desecration. They affirm life at the necessary price of disaffirming the surrounding reality. The world of experience and the world of language could not, at this moment, be further apart. Experience is entirely beyond words. Words are utterly inadequate to convey experience.

The dissonance makes itself felt stylistically as well. Eliezer sums up his response to these first shattering hours of his arrival at Auschwitz in the most famous passages of Night and, perhaps, of all of Wiesel's writing: "Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed." The passage takes the form of an oath never to forget this night of his arrival. The oath, the recourse to metaphorical language ("which has turned my life into one long night"), the reference to curses and phraseology ("seven times cursed") echo the biblical language in which Eliezer was so steeped. He continues: "Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky." The oath is an oath of protest, the "silent blue sky," an accusation: "Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever." Here and in the sentences that follow, Wiesel uses the rhythms, the verbal energy, imagery, and conventions of the Bible to challenge, accuse, and deny God:

Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.

The elaborate oath of remembrance recalls the stern biblical admonitions of remembrance. The negative formulation of the oath and the incremental repetition of the word "never" register defiance and anger even as the eight repetitions circumscribing the passage give it rhythmic structure and ceremonial shape. Ironically, these repetitions seem to implicate mystical notions of God's covenant with the Jews, a covenant associated with the number eight because the ceremony of entrance into the convenant by way of circumcision takes place on the eighth day after birth. The passage uses the poetry and language of faith to affirm a shattering of faith.

The passage is a tour de force of contradiction, paradox, and formal dissonances that are not reconciled, but juxtaposed and held up for inspection. In a sparely written, tightly constructed narrative, it is the only extended poetic moment. It is a climactic moment, and, strangely, for a work that privileges a world outside words altogether, a rhetorical moment: a moment constructed out of words and the special effects and properties of their combinations, a moment that hovers above the abyss of human extremity in uncertain relationship to it.

Like the taste of bread to a man who has not eaten, the effect of so poetic a passage lies in what preceded it. Extremity fills words with special and different meanings. Eliezer reacts to the words of one particular SS
officer: "But his clipped words made us tremble. Here the word 'furnace' was not a word empty of meaning; it floated on the air, mingling with the smoke. It was perhaps the only word which did have any real meaning here."

Wiesel's narrative changes our conventional sense of the word "night" in the course of our reading. Night, which as a metaphor for evil always projects, however subliminally, the larger rhythm and structure within which the damages of evil are mitigated, comes to stand for another possibility altogether. The word comes to be filled with the historical flames and data for which there are no metaphors, no ameliorating or sublimating structures. It acquires the almost-tactile feel of the existential, opaque world that is the world of the narrative and also the world in which we live.

Perhaps the finest tribute to Night is to be found in the prologue of Terrence Des Pres's book on poetry and politics, Praises and Dispraises. Des Pres is speaking of Czesław Milosz and of other poets who have lived through extremity and writes: "If we should wonder why their voices are valued so highly, it's that they are acquainted with the night, the nightmare spectacle of politics especially." [Praises and Dispraises, 1988] Des Pres uses the word "night" and the reader immediately understands it in exactly Wiesel's revised sense of it.

To be acquainted with the Night, in this sense, and to bring that knowledge to a readership is to bring the world we live in into sharper focus. The necessary job of making a better world cannot possibly begin from anywhere else.


Essays and Criticism: Broken Continuities: Night and White Crucifixion

Around 3:00 A.M. on November 10, 1938, gaping darkness began to spew the flames that were to burn unabated for the next seven years. On this night Nazi mobs executed a well-planned "spontaneous outrage" throughout the precincts of German Jewry. Synagogues were burned, their sacred objects profaned and destroyed; Jewish dwellings were ransacked, their contents strewn and pillaged. Shattering the windows of Jewish shops, the growing swarm left businesses in ruin. Uprooting tombstones and desecrating Jewish graves, the ghoulish throng violated even the sanctuary of the dead. Humiliation accompanied physical violence: in Leipzig, Jewish residents were hurled into a small stream at the zoological park where spectators spit at them, defiled them with mud and jeered at their plight. A chilling harbinger of nights yet to come, the events of this November darkness culminated in widespread arrest of Jewish citizens and led to their transport to concentration camps. Nazi propagandists, struck by a perverse poetry, gave to this night the name by which it has endured in memory: Kristallnacht, the night of broken glass. Irony abounds in such a name, for in the litter of shattered windows lies more than bits of glass. Kristallnacht testifies to a deeper breaking of basic human continuities. Shattered windows leave faith in fragments and pierce the wholeness of the human spirit.

In that same year of 1938 the Jewish artist Marc Chagall would complete a remarkable painting titled White Crucifixion. Here the artist depicts a crucified Christ, skirted with a tallith and encircled by a kaleidoscopic swirl of images that narrates the progress of a Jewish pogrom. The skewed, tau-shaped cross extends toward the arc of destruction and bears particular meaning in that context. Whatever the cross of Christ may mean, in 1938 it was circumscribed by the realities of Holocaust: the onrush of a weapons-bearing mob overruns houses and sets them aflame; a group of villagers seeks to flee the destruction in a crowded boat, while others crouch on the outskirts of the village; an old man wipes the tears from his eyes as he vanishes from the picture, soon to be followed by a bewildered peasant and a third man who clutches a Torah to himself as he witnesses over his shoulder a synagogue fully ablaze.
Chagall's juxtaposition of crucifixion and the immediacy of Jewish suffering creates an intense interplay of religious expectation and historical reality that challenges our facile assumptions. He does not intend to Christianize the painting, certainly not in the sense of affirming any atoning resolution of the Jewish plight. Rather, in the chaotic world of *White Crucifixion* all are unredeemed, caught in a vortex of destruction binding crucified victim and modern martyr. As the prayer shawl wraps the loins of the crucified figure, Chagall makes clear that the Christ and the Jewish sufferer are one.

We must not misunderstand Jewish appropriation of the cross in the context of Holocaust art and literature. Where used at all, the cross functions not as an answer to atrocity, but as a question, protest and critique of the assumptions we may have made about profound suffering. Emil Fackenheim puts the matter in this way:

> A good Christian suggests that perhaps Auschwitz was a divine reminder of the suffering of Christ. Should he not ask instead whether his Master himself, had He been present at Auschwitz, could have resisted degradation and dehumanization? What are the sufferings of the Cross compared to those of a mother whose child is slaughtered to the sound of laughter or the strains of a Viennese waltz? This question may sound sacrilegious to Christian ears. Yet we dare not shirk it, for we—Christians as well as Jews—must ask, at Auschwitz, did the grave win the victory after all, or, worse than the grave, did the devil himself win? [God's Presence in History (New York University Press, 1972) p. 75]

Questions such as these spring off Chagall's canvas and into our sensibilities. *White Crucifixion* depicts a world of unleashed terror within which no saving voice can be heard nor any redeeming signs perceived. Separated from the imperiled villagers by only his apparent passivity, Chagall's Messiah, this Jew of the cross, is no rescuer, but himself hangs powerless before the chaotic fire. The portrayal of Messiah as victim threatens to sever the basic continuity we have wanted to maintain between suffering and redemption… To have redemptive meaning, the cross must answer the victims who whirl here in torment, for, in the Holocaust, the world becomes … "one great mount of crucifixion, with thousands of severed Jewish heads strewn below like so many thieves" (Roskie, p. 268).

Yet precisely here the language of redemption seems trivial, if not obscenely blind to the sufferer's predicament. Can one speak of redemption in any way that does not trifle with the victim's cry? Before the mother's despair, words of redemption offer no consolation; instead, like the laughter and music which accompany her child's murder, such words mock her torment and deny the profundity of her suffering. The rhetoric of redemption, no matter how benevolently used, remains the ploy of oppressors even decades later. No one may invoke it for the victim in whose world it may have no place.

That world of the victim has found literary testament in the writings of Elie Wiesel, himself a survivor of Auschwitz and Buchenwald, and recently the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. Although his writings are prolific, few of his works have had the impact of his first narrative, the memoir *Night*. For a decade following the war—years in which he was a stateless refugee in France—Wiesel maintained a personal moratorium on his experience, a pledge of silence that would allow no word to betray the Holocaust memory. On this matter he wrote nothing and spoke nothing, but listened to the voices within himself. Then in 1956 his memories exploded into an 800-page Yiddish text, "Un di Velt Hot Geshvign" (And the World Kept Silent). Over the next two years Wiesel would live with this manuscript, paring away from its pages every letter that was not absolutely essential, every mark on the page that might divert from the intense reality of its truth. The result: the stark volume *Night*, some 120 pages that have become a landmark in Holocaust literature. *Night*, too, places the Jew on the cross. It describes the hanging of a young boy who had worked with a well-liked overseer. Both had become suspected of sabotage, and the boy is sentenced to hang, along with two prisoners found with weapons.

29
One day when we came back from work, we saw three gallows rearing up in the assembly place, three black crows. Roll call. SS all around us, machine guns trained the traditional ceremony. Three victims in chains—and one of them, the little servant, the sad-eyed angel….

The three victims mounted together onto the chairs.

"Where is God? Where is He?" someone behind me asked.

At a sign from the head of the camp, the three chairs tipped over.

Total silence throughout the camp. On the horizon, the sun was setting….

Then the march past began. The two adults were no longer alive. Their tongues hung swollen, bluetinged. But the third rope was still moving; being so light, the child was still alive….

For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face. He was still alive when I passed in front of him. His tongue was still red, his eyes not yet glazed.

Behind me, I heard the same man asking:

"Where is God now?"

And I heard a voice within me answer him:

"Where is He? Here He is—He is hanging here on this gallows…"

Francois Mauriac, the French Catholic writer and author of the foreword to Night, found in this scene not only the center of Wiesel's story but also the essential question for his own appropriation of Christian faith. In 1954 Wiesel, then a young journalist, had occasion to interview Mauriac who just two years earlier had won the Nobel Prize in literature. The interview proved to be a decisive turning point for both of them: for Wiesel, Mauriac provided the compassionate challenge to tell the story of darkness, for Mauriac, Wiesel made unavoidably personal the plight of the Holocaust child. Upon reading Night, Mauriac wrote the following:

And I who believe that God is love, what answer could I give my young questioner, whose dark eyes still held the reflection of that angelic sadness which had appeared one day upon the face of the hanged child? What did I say to him? Did I speak of that other Israeli, his brother, who may have resembled him—the Crucified, whose Cross has conquered the world? Did I affirm that the stumbling block to his faith was the cornerstone of mine, and that conformity between the Cross and the suffering of men was in my eyes the key to that impenetrable mystery whereon the faith of his childhood had perished? But I could only embrace him, weeping. ["Foreword to Night," pp. 1011]

Mauriac, long a poignant witness to the connection between suffering and love, knew well that the cornerstone of his faith was at stake in Wiesel's narrative. And yet, at the point at which he might have been tempted to proclaim his gospel, he finds that the only fitting response is to embrace the victim, blessing him with tears. The reason is clear: the death of the sad-eyed angel creates a stumbling block not only for Wiesel, but for Mauriac; not only for the Jewish victim, but for the Christian onlooker who cannot interpret away the scandalous scene without trivializing its grossly unredeemed features. In Mauriac's embrace human compassion stifles theological conviction, rescuing it from becoming an oppressive utterance….
We misread the scene if we assume that the writer's tears are tied only to his perception of the victim's tragedy. The conversation between Mauriac and Wiesel begins with Mauriac's recollection of the German occupation of France admitting his painful knowledge of the trainloads of Jewish children standing at Austerlitz station. As Wiesel responds, "I was one of them," Mauriac sees himself anew as an unwitting onlooker, the bystander guilty not of acts undertaken, but of acts not taken. The indictment is not Wiesel's but Mauriac's own, born of the self-perception that not to stand with the victim is to act in complicity with his or her oppressor. Mauriac's tears signify his humble repentance, his turning away from the role of onlooker to align himself with the victim. The observer becomes witness, testifying on behalf of the victim. Crucifixion indicts, for in its shadow we are always the guilty bystander. Humility, such as Mauriac's, puts an end to any assumption of benign righteousness; repentance denies complacency to the viewer of another's passion. 

Crucifixion, be it the cross of Jesus or the nocturnal Golgotha of Auschwitz, breaks the moral continuities by which we have considered ourselves secure and whole. To mend these fragments of human experience lies outside our power. We cannot repair the broken world. Yet, as we yield these broken continuities to narrative—to memoir, to literature, to liturgy—we begin to forge a new link that binds storyteller and hearer, victim and witness. But here we must be most careful. We rush to tell the story, confident that it is ours to tell when, in fact, it is ours to hear.


Analysis

On March 19, 1944, German Schutzstaffeln (SS) troops under Adolf Eichmann entered Hungary for the express purpose of rounding up the Jews of that country for extermination. Even as German armies elsewhere were retreating under pounding Russian advances, Adolf Hitler’s so-called final solution was extended to Hungarian Jews—who had mistakenly thought themselves safe from German danger. A few days after the invasion, SS troops appeared in the Transylvanian town of Sighet and began the brutal process that would send almost all Sighet’s fifteen thousand Jews to their deaths at Auschwitz in Poland. Among those Jews who lives were totally uprooted was a devout fourteen-year-old student of the Talmud, Eliezer Wiesel.

Wiesel’s experiences from that point to eventual liberation at Buchenwald on April 11, 1945, made up an eight-hundred-page Yiddish manuscript, written after the completion of a self-imposed ten-year period of silence, study, and reflection concerning the Holocaust. Night, outlined within weeks after his liberation (and only one-seventh of the Yiddish original), is Wiesel’s only book devoted completely to the Holocaust, although his experiences of life in Auschwitz and the loss of the six million dictate almost all Wiesel’s thought and writing.

The book’s nine chapters demarcate key events for Wiesel, detailing the gradual loss of the illusion of hope as the grim realities become paramount. Two interrelated concerns are woven throughout the narrative: Wiesel’s agonizing loss of faith in the God of his childhood and his excruciating relationship with his weakening father. The latter is marked by filial love and concern, but also by his own devastating guilt as his father slips inexorably toward death and Wiesel anticipates freedom from his burden of devotion.

Night reveals the destruction of all aspects of the accepted universe—the shtetl (the Jewish enclave) of Sighet, family life, the training of a deeply religious child, and the illusion of a caring humanity. Yet above all, it sets forth a sequence of experiences that results in Wiesel’s becoming “the accuser, God the accused.” A universe is revealed in Night in which “anything is allowed.” After seeing a truck dump babies into a burning pit, Wiesel cries, Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little
faces of the children. . . . Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever. . . . Never shall I
forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I
forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.

Following the execution of a child possessing “the face of a sad angel,” a voice asserts that God “is hanging
here on this gallows.” Wiesel is deliberately ambiguous about the source of this assertion.

The nine chapters in Night are devoted to specific aspects of Wiesel’s Holocaust experience: the warnings and
illusion-filled prelude before deportation, the terrifying train ride to Auschwitz, the arrival at the gates of the
SS hell, the loss of family members, and the early signs of a shattering faith. Wiesel recalls the slave labor at
the Buna works adjacent to the central Auschwitz complex, the promise of the approaching Russian army’s
liberation destroyed by the SS evacuation of camp inmates, the march away from Auschwitz toward
Germany, the train ride to Buchenwald, the death of his father, and his own liberation. The book’s tone varies
from irony to bitterness to terrible despair, with the latter perhaps being dominant. As its Yiddish title
suggests (literally, “and the world remained silent”), Wiesel’s book is addressed to the world that did nothing,
but it also challenges a God who did nothing.

Wiesel is acutely conscious of the duty of the survivor and writer following the Holocaust to educate that
apathetic world and to provide a voice for the six million murdered Jewish victims. In an interview published
in the Journal of Education (1980), he noted, “I do not write to please the reader. . . . I write for the dead.”
Wiesel himself calls Night the literature of testimony.

Analysis: Places Discussed

*Sighet

*Sighet (SEE-get). Transylvanian village in which the novel’s opening section is set. Scenes in Sighet provide
an introduction to life in the Jewish community by focusing on Wiesel’s introduction to his Jewish heritage
and religion. The invading Nazi troops establish two ghettos into which the village’s Jews are herded after
being forced to give up all but what they can carry with them.

*Birkenau

*Birkenau. Polish town that is the site of the first concentration camp in which the Wiesel family is
imprisoned. Following their stay in the ghetto, the family, along with their neighbors, are put onto trains and
sent to concentration camps. Their first stop is Birkenau, where they are introduced to the horrors that follow.
There they see families separated, mothers and children going in one direction and fathers and working-age
sons in another. Wiesel’s mother and sister are taken from him and, as he learns later, murdered. At Birkenau
young Wiesel witnesses people giving up on life and willing themselves to die. In fact, Wiesel himself
contemplates suicide, but the religious teachings he receives at home and the dogged determination of his
father keep him from killing himself.

*Auschwitz

*Auschwitz. Polish city that is the site of another concentration camp to which Wiesel, his father, and
numerous workers from their first camp are later sent. There, Wiesel is briefly separated from his father.
Although he is still in a concentration camp, Wiesel finds Auschwitz much more attractive than his previous
prison because it is cleaner. Even though his job as a factory worker allows him to prove that he should be
allowed to live, Wiesel becomes jaded and numb to the beatings he experiences and the deaths of those
around him. About the time he becomes acclimated to his new surroundings, Wiesel is sent to Buna with his
father.

The greatest adjustment that Wiesel makes at the new camp is to the smell of burning bodies. There, too, Wiesel undergoes surgery on a seriously injured foot. Acquaintances warn him that he must not remain in the hospital too long or he will be killed. At one point, while still recovering, Wiesel is forced to march in the prison yard with other prisoners to prevent Russian planes from bombing the camp. In fact, the weak and wounded prisoners are forced to make a forty-two mile march to another concentration camp, Buchenwald.

Upon reaching this camp, the prisoners are allowed to rest. However, as a result of their long march and a serious case of dysentery, Wiesel’s father dies, leaving his son to survive on his own. Elie is eventually among the few prisoners who are finally liberated from Buchenwald.

Scenes in the concentration camps become even more focused when Wiesel takes readers into the barracks, factories, hospitals, and death chambers that become the scenes of horror. He survived in part because of the strong religious faith that he had developed through his early education and the examples of his parents.

**Analysis: Historical Context**

**Hitler, WWII, and the Jewish Holocaust**

The mass murder of European Jews and others under Nazi rule during World War II has come to be known simply as the Holocaust. "Holocaust" literally means "massive destruction by fire." It is thought that eleven million people were killed by the Nazis. These included political opponents (particularly Communists), Slavs, gypsies, mentally and/or physically disabled, homosexuals, and other "undesirables." An estimated six million men, women, and children were killed merely because they were Jews. The destruction of the Jews in Europe stands as the archetype of genocide in human history.

Jews had been the subjects of persecution in Europe at least since the seventeenth century. When Adolph Hitler, the charismatic, Austrian-born demagogue, rose to power in Germany during the 1920s and early 1930s, he rallied the German people with a message that included notions of “Aryan,” or white, superiority and the inferiority of other races. The Jews were a special target of his hatred, and they were incorrectly represented during this time of social, political, and economic upheaval as being wealthy and in control of the country’s economy. In 1932, Hitler ran for president of Germany. He did not win, but he did well, and when the party in power was unable to end the depression, its leaders turned to Hitler for help. He became chancellor, or prime minister, of Germany in 1933. Within weeks, he set into motion a series of laws that destroyed the nation's democratic government. He eliminated all opposition and launched a program of world domination and extermination of the Jews. His government, like all totalitarian regimes, established complete political, social, and cultural control over its subjects.

In Hitler's program for the "Aryanization" of Germany and world conquest, Jews were subjected first to discrimination, then persecution, and then state-condoned terrorism. This had as a turning point, the "night of the broken glass" also known as Kristallnacht, which took place in Munich, Germany, in November 1938. Nazi storm troopers burned down synagogues and broke into Jewish homes, terrorizing men, women, and children. Over twenty thousand people were arrested and taken to concentration camps. After Kristallnacht, Jewish businesses were expropriated, employers were urged to fire Jewish employees, and offices were set up to expedite emigration. Jews could buy their freedom and leave the country, but they had to abandon their assets when they left. By the outbreak of war in September 1939, half of Germany’s five hundred thousand Jews had fled, as had many Jews from other German-occupied areas.

Hitler's Nazi government planned a "Final Solution" to the "Jewish question." After experimenting with different methods of mass extermination, Nazis settled on the gas chamber as the most efficient. Death camp
operations began in December 1941 at Semlin in Serbia and at Chelmno in Poland, where people were killed by exhaust fumes in specially modified vans that were driven to nearby sites where bodies were plundered and burnt. At Chelmno and Semlin, 265,000 Jews were killed in this way.

More camps opened in the spring and summer of 1942, when the Nazis began clearing the ghettos in Poland and rounding up Jews in western Europe for deportation to labor and concentration camps such as those at Treblinka, Belzec, and Sobibor. The largest of the death camps was at Auschwitz. It was originally a concentration camp for Polish political prisoners but was expanded in 1941 with the addition of a larger camp at nearby Birkenau. Auschwitz-Birkenau and its subcamps held 400,000 prisoners, including 205,000 Jews. In the spring of 1942, gas chambers were built at Birkenau, and mass transports of Jews began to arrive there. Some were held as registered prisoners, but the great majority was gassed. These gassing operations were expanded in 1943, and four gas chamber and crematorium complexes were built. Before they were killed, the victims' valuables were stripped from them. Their hair was used to stuff mattresses, and any gold in their teeth was melted down. In total, about one million Jews died at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

The extermination of European Jews reached a new peak in the summer of 1944, after Germany invaded Hungary, and the new (but not yet fully fascist) Hungarian government fully cooperated in the deportation of 430,000 Jews to Auschwitz in only seven weeks, from May 15 to July 9. About 100,000 of the Hungarian Jews were selected for forced labor—they were assigned to work in the construction of factories for German fighter planes and other tasks. Another 80,000 Jews were exempted from deportation and consigned instead to the Hungarian Army's forced Labor Service.

The Final Solution moved into its last stages as Allied forces closed in on Germany in 1944. The camps were closed and burned down. Prisoners remaining at concentration camps in the occupied lands were transported or force-marched to camps in Germany. Thousands of prisoners on these death marches died of starvation, exhaustion, and cold, or they were shot. When the war ended and the concentration camps were liberated by Allied troops, thousands of unburied corpses and tens of thousands of sick and dying prisoners were found crammed into overcrowded barracks without food or water.

Much of Europe was destroyed in the war. Survivors of the camps were in terrible condition, both physically and psychologically. Many lost their faith, committed suicide, or were otherwise unable to resume normal lives. Trials were held in Nuremberg in 1945 at which top surviving Nazi leaders were tried for war crimes. Similar trials followed, but thousands of war criminals eluded justice. Millions of people were displaced, feeling unwelcome or unable to return to their former homes. Israel was established as a state in 1948 and opened its doors to all Jews, and many of them who survived the Holocaust migrated there, as well as to the United States, Australia, and elsewhere.

Analysis: Literary Style

Narrative
The novella is a short piece of fiction that is based on the author's eight hundred-page memoir of his time in the Nazi death camps. The shortened tale is told from a first person point of view. There is no attempt to enter other minds and little attempt to explain what is on the narrator's mind. The sole purpose of the book is to relate briefly and succinctly what happened. The reader's conclusions are meant to be independent, although they have been lead, quite consciously, toward an abhorrence of the moral vacuum presented in the camps.

Semantics
The problem of capturing the unrepresentable, or sublime, into an art product has not been impossible since the Roman treatise on the topic by Longinus. Using examples from the Old Testament (particularly Genesis and Job), the Iliad, and poetry, he displayed the successful methods for capturing nature in verse, ecstasy in
poetry, the abyss in myth, and supreme beings in mere names. As a result, Occidental aesthetics views nothing as beyond the ability of the well-trained artist to present it in a packaged form.

Nevertheless, the moral chaos and utter hell that was the Holocaust surpassed any previously recorded human abyss. For some, even fifty years later, it has broken the aesthetic mold of Longinus; how is it possible to comprehend, let alone represent, this most awful of all events? Not easily, yet Wiesel's methods resemble those humans who preceded him in the effort to understand the horrible and sublime by representing their experience in one form or other. It is through that artistic effort that comprehension comes.

The means of representing the unrepresentable are the techniques of the sparse and staccato. In this case, those techniques are used to keep the reader, as much as possible, in mind of how precious is the breath of air the death camp inmates survive on. Words are used sparingly and, when possible, blank space is used instead.

The terse sentences remind the reader of the necessity of conserving energy: one is meant to be bothered by the apparent waste of Eliezer's run across the camp (at the end of a workday) to check on his father. Generally, scenes are made up of few words yet loom large; the storyteller relies on the imagination of the audience, rather than on his ability. He places the dots and hints at the color, but the reader creates the image. Sentences like: "An open tomb," "Never," "The gate to the camp opened." They are fragments, scraps of evidence that remain until they are sown together into a narrative which makes sense of what happened. The narrative replaces the useless pictures the GIs took when they liberated the camps. The struggle of representing the unrepresentable horror, as Wiesel discovered, is best accomplished in the same way that Longinus felt the writers of the Talmud did—with few words and plenty of space for digestion.

**Allusion**

*Night* is full of scriptural allusions, or hints of reference to biblical passages. In fact, the very timelessness of the constant night is reminiscent of supernatural tales. Hasidic tales especially do not follow Occidental notions but develop their own time according to the message of the story. "Time," says Sibelman, "is represented as a creative force, a bridge sinking man to eternity." Within the story time are more direct allusions to particular stories. Two of the most memorable examples will suffice to demonstrate.

Immediately after realizing that the group is not marching into the death pit, there is the incantation, "Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp … " etc. This passage is a pastiche of Psalm 150. In French (and Wiesel writes in French or Yiddish), the start of each line begins with *Jamais* (meaning never). Psalm 150 praises God for his works and deeds while the "Never" passage commits just the opposite reality to memory.

Another example of allusion is the execution of the three prisoners. One of these doomed prisoners is an innocent child, a pipel. This scene recalls the moment in the Christian Gospel when Christ is crucified. In the Gospel according to Matthew, he is accompanied by two thieves. At the point of expiration, Christ asks God why he has been forsaken. At death, the sky darkens and the onlookers murmur that this was definitely the Son of God. In contradistinction, the death of the pipel bothers the onlookers in the opposite way. There is still a look for God but this time, "[w]here is he? Here He is—He is hanging here on the gallows…"

**Anti-bildungsroman**

Traditionally, the bildungsroman in German literature is the story of a young, naive man entering the world to seek adventure. He finds his adventure, but it provides him with an important lesson. The denouement finds him happy, wiser, and ready for a productive life. The classic example is J. W. von Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*.

Wiesel's novella turns this tradition on its head. He presents an educated, young man forced into a hell made by human hands. There he learns more wisdom than he asked for, even when he dreamed of learning the
mystical tradition. What he learns about human behavior he would rather not apply. In the end, he sees himself in the mirror, for the first time in several years, as a corpse. The result is not that he will think about being a productive worker, but about healing humanity.

Analysis: Compare and Contrast

- **1956:** The Holocaust outside of Israel, is not discussed. The nearest approach is the reworking of Anne Frank's story for the stage.

  Today: Ignoring the right-wing extremists who deny the Holocaust ever happened, recent years have seen a number of mourning activities for Holocaust victims. Elie Wiesel was named head of the Swiss Holocaust Fund. All across Germany, memorials, art works, and peace shrines have been raised. Art has been returned and Spielberg's Schindler's List has been viewed by millions of people around the world. Holocaust museums have been opened in several cities and archives set up for the recording of survivor testimony.

- **1956:** The Cold War "heats" up as suburban dwellers construct bomb shelters in their backyards. At school, the kids practice air raid drills.

  Today: The Cold War has ended. The U. S. and Russia are almost partners both politically and economically. Unfortunately, little has altered in terms of nuclear targeting by either country.

- **1956:** Canada assists India with a nuclear energy program.

  Today: Both Pakistan and India have nuclear capabilities aimed at deterring the other.

- **1956:** It is a tense year in the Middle East due to disagreements over the Suez canal.

  Today: Tensions run high in the Middle East because the peace process stalls between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization.

Analysis: Topics for Further Study

- How does Elie arrive at the conclusion that he is stronger than God?
- Talking with Jason Harris for the Tamalpais News in 1995, Wiesel offered this parable: "A man is walking alone in the woods; he's lost and looking for a way out. Suddenly he sees another man a short distance away from him. He runs over to the man and exclaims, 'Thank God you're here! I'm saved! Surely you know the way out!' to which the man responds, 'First of all: don't go back that way—he points—I just came from there.'" If one considers 'there' as the subject of Night, what is Wiesel suggesting about modern morality? Does it hint at a positive future?
- Consider the following passage: "The stomach alone was aware of the passage of time." What is the function of time in the novel? What mind/body problems does Elie discover in his fight for survival? Lastly, consider that after all the suffering of the camp, Elie gets food poisoning at the end and almost dies; what were the health challenges of saving the camp survivors?
- Do some research into the Holocaust and compare the experience of the Jews, Gypsies, Jehovah's Witness, homosexuals, and others who were imprisoned. Then compare this to the experience of Japanese-Americans and Japanese-Canadians during World War II.
- Theodore Adorno once said, "It is barbaric to continue to write poetry after Auschwitz." What did he mean? Do you agree?
- Read through some of the international treaties on human rights or consider the topic of human rights generally. What role should international bodies play imposing the idea of human rights on other nations (for example: consider Tibet or the Serbian camps of the 1980s)? When is it proper to intervene in another country's business?
Analysis: What Do I Read Next?

- *Night* is the beginning of Wiesel's oeuvre and of a trilogy. The next two works are *L'aube* (*Dawn*, 1961) and *Le Jour* (*The Accident*, 1961) and revolve around survivors of the Holocaust and the way they deal with the memories of the camps.
- Wiesel's 1962 work, *The Town Beyond the Wall*, concerns a Holocaust survivor who returns to Hungary to confront his Nazi persecutors. Rather than find relief, the man discovers that his revenge denies and displaces moral responsibility. There is no satisfaction in revenge.
- The ever popular story of the young girl Anne Frank, *Diary of a Young Girl* (1947) tells of a group of Jews coping with the unbearable stress of hiding from the Nazis. Eventually they are discovered. The diary has been adapted brilliantly for stage and film and remains the favorite memento of the Holocaust.
- Far from the Holocaust, but contemporary with Wiesel's *Night* are the works of Saul Bellow. His *Seize the Day* was published in 1956 and deals with the father/son relationship differently than Wiesel does. Both can be read in terms of the Abraham/Isaac motif. Together, the two works are stark contrasts, yet the hero in both works is haunted by the pressure of responsibility to his father.
- Though some have difficulty with the idea that such a serious topic as the Holocaust would be treated in such a genre as the graphic novel, Art Spiegelman's 1980-1991 collection *Maus* is a brilliant synopsis of the Holocaust. With cats as Nazis, mice as Jews, and pigs as Poles, the novel exposes more of the tensions that are involved in moments of moral chaos than could be possible covered in one person's memory of the nightmare.
- The 1995 novel by Gerda Weissmann Klein called *All but My Life*, tells the story of her experience in World War II. It begins in the prewar days of Poland and continues through her three-year stay in German work camps. The story ends happily—she marries the American lieutenant who is part of American force liberating the camp. This book is very different from other Holocaust stories because Klein writes about emotions more than about the ethics of the horror.
- Contemporary with the round up and deportation of Jews in Europe, the Japanese in the United States and Canada were also imprisoned. The story of *Obasan* by Joy Kogawa (1981), tells the tale of how the hysterical fear of invasion by the Japanese lead to the exile of Canadian citizens with Japanese ancestry. They were forced to live in camps in the interior and were not allowed to resume life as full citizens until the early 1950s.
- One contemporary of Elie Wiesel was the poet and beatnik Allen Ginsberg. His poetry reflected much on the suffering of humanity as well as the suffering of his own people in the camps. Late in the 1950s, he brought together a collection of poems entitled *Kaddish and Other Poems*. The poem *Kaddish* itself is a personalizing of the Jewish hymn of mourning for his mother who died insane in 1956.

Bibliography: Bibliography and Further Reading

Sources


**For Further Study**

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Lang, Berel, ed. *Writing and the Holocaust*. Holmes and Meier, 1988. The essays in this volume treat various aspects and problems in writing about the Holocaust, including the difficulty in accurately conveying the horrors of the concentration camps. Several essayists praise Wiesel's literary style as the most effective in bearing witness to the Holocaust.


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Wiesel, Elie. *All Rivers Run to the Sea*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1996. This is the first volume of Wiesel's memoirs, and it expands and comments on events depicted in *Night*.

**Bibliography**


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**Quotes: "Keep Up Appearances"**

Context: Those who have never heard of Charles Churchill will be amazed to learn that his volume of poetical works contains more than 450 pages. The son of a minister and himself intended for the Church he spoiled his chances for a scholarship at Cambridge by an early marriage. Life became difficult. Finally he tried writing poetry to provide an income, and especially to help the political career of his friend in Parliament, John Wilkes (1727–1797). The appearance of his Rosciad brought criticisms of his "ingenious and cruel satire." Most people attributed its authorship to a trio of Robert Lloyd, the dramatist George Colman the Elder, and Bonnell Thornton. So in the second edition Churchill put his name onto the title page and wrote "The Apology," that started a lasting quarrel with Tobias Smollett, author of an article about it in the Critical Review. Then, still apologetic, Churchill addressed another poem to Lloyd, accused of writing the first one. It was of a different style. The income of the Rosciad had lessened restraints put by poverty upon an obscure man. Another reason for taking up his pen again was a poem called "Day," written by an army doctor, John Armstrong (1709–1779), stationed with the forces in Germany. Its manuscript reached John Wilkes, with a request that it be corrected and printed. Churchill imagined himself its target, though he had not been writing long enough to be known, and promptly wrote an answer. It was published in January, 1762, a year after the appearance of "Day." Critics did not think highly of it. Its morality was far removed from that of a Christian, and the careless diction was unworthy of the author of the Rosciad. He begins it, "When foes insult, and prudent friends dispense,/ In pity's strain, the worst of insolence"; then the poet pays his tribute to his friend Lloyd. In the course of the poem, Churchill brings out his own enmity with Smollet who, because he was a surgeon's mate at the siege of Cartagena in 1741, thought he could set himself up as a physician at Bath. Churchill says he himself leads the sort of life that suits him best. He prefers night life. Punning, he declares: "We, our friends, our foes, ourselves, survey./ And see by NIGHT what fools we are by DAY." He refuses to court those who appear great. He is "too proud to flatter, too sincere to lie./ Too plain to please, too honest to be great." Then he quotes an ironic tutor "more read in men than books," a "crafty man, demurely sly," who gives this satirical advice to his favorite pupil:

Would'st thou, my son, be wise and virtuous deem'd,By all mankind a prodigy esteem'd?Be this thy rule; be what people prudent call;PRUDENCE, almighty PRUDENCE gives thee all.Keep up appearances; there lies the test,The world will give thee credit for the rest.Outward be fair, however foul within;Sin if thou wilt, but then in secret sin.This maxim's into common favor grown,Vice is no longer vice unless 'tis known.Virtue indeed may barefaced take the field,But vice is virtue, when 'tis well conceal'd.