



Night

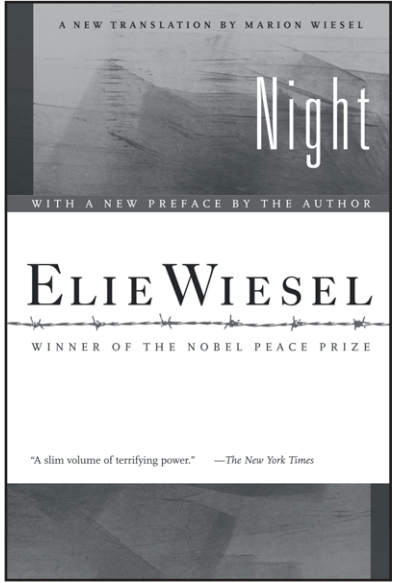
by Elie Wiesel

A new translation by Marion Wiesel

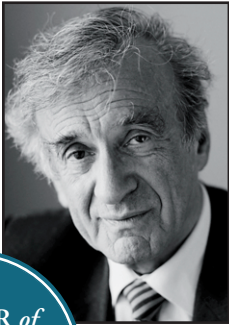


“To the best of my knowledge no one has left behind so moving a record.”

—Alfred Kazin



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Sergey Bermeiev



TO THE TEACHER

Night is Elie Wiesel’s masterpiece, a candid, horrific, and deeply saddening autobiographical account of surviving the Holocaust while a young teenager. It is considered a classic of Holocaust literature, and was one of the first texts to be recognized as such.

Set in a series of German concentration camps, *Night* offers much more than a litany of the daily terrors—the unspeakable yet commonplace occurrences, the everyday perversion and rampant inhumanity—of life inside a death camp. However painful this memoir is to read, it also keenly and eloquently addresses many of the philosophical as well as personal questions implicit in any serious consideration of what the Holocaust was, what it meant, and what its legacy is and will be.

Elie (or Eliezer) Wiesel’s recorded experiences—detailing the deaths of his family and friends, the death of his innocence as a young man, and the death of his God—reveal the formation of a sensibility that must accommodate the sorrow and wisdom implicit in living through a tragedy. Shocking, brutal, perceptive, and only slightly variant from Wiesel’s own personal and familial history, *Night* is a testament of memories, wounds, and losses. But this memoir is also a testament of the Jewish

PREPARING
TO READ

people. *Night* speaks for Wiesel and his family while also speaking for all Jews who knew about life and death in the camps; like many other eyewitness accounts of the Holocaust, it looks to the individual in order to convey the psychological and emotional injuries of all who carry the burden of survival.

Elie Wiesel, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986, has written dozens of novels, short stories, essays, plays, and historical studies. He teaches humanities at Boston University, was instrumental in the creation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and is considered one of the premier humanists of modern times. Wiesel has dedicated his life to speaking out against hatred, bigotry, and genocide, and *Night*, his autobiographical first book, is among the finest and most important works of Holocaust reportage ever published. The following questions are meant to underscore this importance. These questions aim not only to guide your students through this book's narrative and arguments, but also to highlight its historical cohesiveness and emotional heft.

Lastly, given the gravely serious historical perspectives set forth in *Night*, teachers are strongly encouraged to equip their students with a considerable degree of background information on the Holocaust. For those so inclined, a section titled "Suggestions for Further Study" comes after the following questions.

QUESTIONS ON
COMPREHENSION

1. Describe in detail the characters of Eliezer and Moishe the Beadle. What is the nature of their relationship?
2. Consider Eliezer's feelings for his family, especially his father. What about his father's character or place in the Jewish community of Sighet commands Eliezer's respect or admiration?
3. Early in the narrative, Moishe tells Eliezer, "Man asks and God replies. But we don't understand His replies. We cannot understand them" (p. 5). Is this a paradox? How does Eliezer react to this seemingly unfair assertion? Apply Moishe's statement to the ongoing crisis of faith that Eliezer faces throughout the course of *Night*.

4. “And then, one day all foreign Jews were expelled from Sighet,” writes Wiesel, quite bluntly. “And Moishe the Beadle was a foreigner” (p. 6). Why do you suppose this shocking information is delivered so matter-of-factly? What is the point of Wiesel’s abruptness? Also, consider the manner in which Moishe is treated by the Jews of Sighet after he has escaped the Gestapo’s capture. Are the people happy to see him? Is he himself even happy to be alive? Explain why Moishe has returned to the village. Why don’t the Jewish townspeople believe the horrible news he brings back to them?

5. Time and again, the people of Sighet doubt the advance of the German army. Why? When the Germans do arrive, and even once they have moved all the Jews into ghettos, the Jewish townspeople still seem to ignore or suppress their fear. “Most people thought that we would remain in the ghetto until the end of the war, until the arrival of the Red Army. Afterward everything would be as before” (p. 12). What might be the reasons for the townspeople’s widespread denial of the evidence facing them?

6. There are a few instances where we learn of Eliezer and his family missing out on opportunities to escape from the Germans (pp. 9, 14, and 82). How did these missed chances influence your reading of this memoir? And how do these unfortunate events fit into your understanding of the Jewish experience of the Holocaust as a whole?

7. Cassandra was a figure in Greek mythology who received the gift of prophecy with the simultaneous curse that no one would ever believe her. Compare Cassandra to Mrs. Schächter. Are there other Cassandras in *Night*? Who are they?

8. Not long after arriving at Birkenau, Eliezer and his father experience the horrors of the crematory firsthand—and are nearly killed themselves. “Babies!” Wiesel writes. “Yes, I did see this, with my own eyes . . . children thrown into the flames” (p. 32). Look back on Eliezer’s physical, mental, and emotional reactions to this hellish and inexplicable experience. How does the story of *Night* change at this point? How does Wiesel himself change?

9. Consider the inscription that appears above the entrance to Auschwitz. What is it supposed to mean? What meaning, if any, does this slogan come to have for Eliezer?

10. Reflecting on the three weeks he spent at Auschwitz, Wiesel admits on p. 45: “Some of the men spoke of God: His mysterious ways, the sins of the Jewish people, and the redemption to come. As for me, I had ceased to pray. I concurred with Job!” What happens to the man called Job in the Bible? What is his story? Explain why Eliezer feels connected to him.

11. On p. 65, Eliezer witnesses one of the several public hangings he sees in Buna. “For God’s sake, where is God?” asks a prisoner who also sees the hanging. “Where He is?” answers Eliezer, though talking only to himself. “This is where—hanging here from this gallows . . .” What does he mean by this? How could God have been hanged? How have Eliezer’s thoughts and feelings changed since he identified with Job while in Auschwitz (see question 10)? Discuss the relationship that Wiesel has with God throughout *Night*.

12. Two of the people Eliezer encounters more than once in the narrative are Akiba Drumer and Juliek. Where and when does Eliezer cross paths with these individuals? Describe their personalities. What are their outstanding traits? Describe the relationships that Eliezer has with each of them. How do their respective deaths affect Eliezer? What does each person mean to him?

13. As the story progresses, we witness scenes in which the Jews have been reduced to acting—and even treating their fellow prisoners—like rabid animals. During an air raid over Buna (see p. 59), a starved man risks being shot by crawling out to a cauldron of soup that stands in the middle of the camp, only to thrust his face into the boiling liquid once he has arrived there safely. Where else do we see examples of human beings committing such insane acts? What leads people to such horrific behavior? Is it fair to say that such beastliness in the death camps is inevitable? Do Eliezer and his father fall prey to such tragedies?

14. In the concluding pages of *Night*, Eliezer’s father is dying a slow, painful death in Buchenwald. But Eliezer is there to comfort him, or at least to try. Does Eliezer see his father as a burden by this point, or does he feel only pity and sorrow for him? Compare and contrast the father-son relationship you see at the end of this memoir with the one you saw at the beginning.

15. Look again at the opening pages of *Night*. When it begins, twelve-year-old Eliezer lives in the Transylvanian village of Sighet with his parents and sisters. How does being introduced to such people alter your understanding of the fact that, a half-century ago, six million Jews were exterminated in the Holocaust? How is this sickening truth achieved through *Night*’s dual purposes of memoir and history? If this is a story of one person’s journey as well as a history of one horrendous part of World War II, how do the plot and the theme of the book overlap? How does the author blend the personal and the universal aspects of *Night*? In what ways does Wiesel relate not only his own nightmarish memory of the Holocaust but also humanity’s?

16. At once unthinkable and unforgettable, the autobiographical *Night* offers an eyewitness account of the utmost importance, but it is essentially one young man’s story. What had you read, heard, or otherwise learned about the Holocaust before reading *Night*? How did Wiesel’s remembrance agree with or differ from what you already knew about the history of this event?

17. Elie Wiesel has written in *The New York Times* (June 19, 2000) about the difficulties he faced in finding the right words for the painful story he wanted to tell—and had to tell—in *Night*. “I knew I had to testify about my past but I did not know how to go about it,” he wrote, adding that his religious mentors, his favorite authors, and the Talmudic sages of his youth were of surprisingly little help. “I felt incapable and perhaps unworthy of fulfilling my task as survivor and messenger. I had things to say but not the words to say them . . . Words seemed weak and pale . . . And yet it was necessary to continue.” Wiesel did continue, and although *Night* was originally rejected by every major publishing house in France and the United States, eventually it was published to universal acclaim. As a story, albeit a true story, how fitting did you find the words, imagery, and overall plotting of *Night*? Does the author succeed in his self-described goals as a “survivor and messenger” who must “testify” to his readers?

18. Given its haunting, clearly rendered, and universal themes of suffering and survival in the face of absolute evil, *Night* is a book that is likely to be echoed or suggested in other works you encounter. In other words, it is a classic. Identify several other books that—in your view—echo or expand on Wiesel’s classic. Explain your choices.

19. Given its horrific and incomprehensible nature, the Holocaust is sometimes described as an “unimaginable” moment of history, and yet—apart from scores of nonfiction accounts like autobiographies (such as *Night*) and documentary films—it is an event that has been imagined or reimagined in many novels, stories, movies, and so forth. Is this contradictory? Why or why not? Does the genre of historical fiction ultimately help or harm the nightmarish actuality of the Holocaust? And how, if at all, did reading *Night* influence your idea of how best to discuss, imagine, and conceptualize the Holocaust?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

A great number of supplemental sources are available for those eager to expand on their knowledge of the origins, history, and aftermath of the Holocaust—and within that number a wide variety. The ever-present need to record our history so as not to forget it, as well as the all-important necessity of documenting the Holocaust so as never to let it be repeated, have in recent decades combined forces and flourished in the creation of a genre known as Holocaust literature. And trends in historical, literary, and cultural scholarship—in part taking their cue from the phenomenon of Holocaust literature, and from the event itself—have subsequently established an academic discipline called Holocaust studies. Either Holocaust literature or Holocaust studies—both of them vast fields of personal, critical, and scholarly endeavor—could be easily explored via the Internet, or else at a local

library, as could such key secondary topics as Judaica and World War II history. Students who aim to know about the events that figure prominently in *Night* should be encouraged to pursue such avenues.

Also, the following books are recommended as excellent points of departure for students wishing to give more thought to this crucial subject: Elie Wiesel's two volumes of memoirs, *All Rivers Run to the Sea* and *And the Sea Is Never Full*; *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank; *The Holocaust* and *The Boys* by Martin Gilbert; *The Destruction of the European Jews* by Raul Hilberg; *All But My Life** by Gerda Weissmann Klein; *The Hours After* by Gerda Weissmann Klein and Kurt Klein; *Survival in Auschwitz* and *The Drowned and the Saved* by Primo Levi; *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* by William L. Shirer; *On Burning Ground* by Michael Skakun; *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, volumes 1 and 2, by Art Spiegelman; and *The Pianist* by Wladyslaw Szpilman. As mentioned before, Elie Wiesel has written dozens of other works, among them novels, memoirs, short stories, essays, plays, and historical studies. Students especially interested in *Night* may also wish to seek out this author's other volumes, in particular the two other volumes of *The Night Trilogy: Dawn and Day*.

Moreover, many motion pictures—both fiction and nonfiction—have been made about the Holocaust. A short list of such films that have received considerable critical acclaim would include the following: *Night and Fog* (directed by Alain Resnais), *Schindler's List* (directed by Steven Spielberg), *Shoah* (directed by Claude Lanzmann), *Sophie's Choice* (directed by Alan J. Pakula), *Life Is Beautiful* (directed by Roberto Benigni), and *The Sorrow and the Pity* (directed by Marcel Ophüls). Screening any of these important films for a class that has read *Night* will surely foster an enlightening range of comparisons and contrasts amid students.

* A Hill and Wang Teacher's Guide is also available for this title.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elie Wiesel, the author of some forty books, is Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Humanities at Boston University. He and his family live in New York City. Professor Wiesel was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986.

Scott Pitcock wrote this Teacher's Guide. He is a writer and editor based in Tulsa, Oklahoma, who attended Westminster College (Missouri) and Columbia University.

NOTES

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