

Background... Just for YOU!

Author Biography

Eliezer Wiesel was born September 30, 1928, in a small, predominantly Jewish village in Romania. The Nazis invaded Wiesel's village in 1944 when Wiesel was sixteen years old. Wiesel and his family, along with the other village residents, were rounded up and deported to Auschwitz. His parents and his younger sister ultimately perished in the camps.

After the liberation of the camps in 1945, Wiesel studied in Paris at the Sorbonne. He began writing for a French newspaper. A mentor encouraged him to write about his experiences in the camps, and thus he began his life's work. In 1958, he published his memoir *Night* (originally published in French, as *La Nuit*). He has since written over thirty books on the Holocaust.

New York has been home to Wiesel for several decades. In 1956, he was in a catastrophic auto accident, which left him confined to a wheelchair for a year. During this time, he decided to become a United States citizen and has since become a key figure in our country's remembrance of the Holocaust. He was chairman of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council from 1980 to 1986. He received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986. He now serves as a Professor of Humanities at Boston University.

Sources: <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~cap/holo/eliobio.htm>,
<http://www.nobel.se/peace/laureates/1986/wiesel-bio.html>

Book Summary

Background

The novel is a personal account of the author's horrendous experience as a young teenager in the ghetto and concentration camps of Buchenwald and Auschwitz. Remind your students that the author is writing this many years after his liberation from the camps. In fact, the Foreword by François Mauriac is a great place to start in introducing the author and the unusual circumstances surrounding the writing of the book. Although the account of the events which Wiesel saw and experienced is being remembered years later, it is clear from the graphic imagery of the novel that the emotional and physical pain that he experienced is engraved in his memory. The transformation from a teenager with a strong faith in God to one who has come to believe, like that of the philosopher Nietzsche, that "God is dead" is dealt with very poignantly in the novel and gives the reader the opportunity to explore his or her own faith or beliefs. The love and respect that Elie shows his father, in direct contrast with others who would fight their own loved ones for a piece of bread, encourages us to think about the principles and values we hold most dear, as well

as how strong our convictions are when confronted with extreme hatred, intolerance, and cruelty. What makes us human, and how quickly can we lose that sense of humanity when following an ideology or a charismatic leader?

Novel Setting

The overall setting of the novel is the horrific concentration “work” camps in Europe during World War II. The author chooses to begin his autobiographical work at the start of 1941 in his home town of Sighet, Transylvania (modern day Romania), in order to show the sharp contrast between what life for a Jewish family was like prior to the war with its traditions, security, and overall belief in the goodness of people, and that extreme barbarism. The description of the brutal conditions within the concentration camps and the forced death marches experienced by the author completes the stark contrast between “home” and the concentration camp.

Before We Start
Handout 1

Name _____

Date _____ Hour _____

Character List

Below is a list of the major characters.

- Eliezer (Elie):** Elie is the narrator of *Night*. He is a Jewish boy of 12 at the end of 1941 and 15 when he enters the concentration camp.
- Chlomo:** Chlomo is Elie's father who is respected by the entire Jewish community and by his son as well.
- Moshe the Beadle:** Moshe the Beadle is Elie's teacher of Jewish mysticism.
- Akiba Drumer:** Akiba is a Jewish Holocaust victim who gradually loses his faith in God as a result of his experiences in the concentration camp.
- Madame Schächter:** Madame Schächter is a Jewish woman who is deported along with her ten-year-old son in the same cattle car as Elie.
- Juliek:** Juliek is a young musician whom Elie meets in Auschwitz.
- Tibi and Yosi:** Tibi and Yosi are two brothers with whom Elie becomes friendly in Buna.
- Dr. Josef Mengele:** Dr. Mengele is a cruel doctor who presides over the selection of arrivals at Auschwitz/Birkenau.
- Idek:** Idek is Elie's Kapo at the electrical equipment warehouse in Buna.
- Franek:** Franek is Eliezer's cruel foreman at Buna.
- Rabbi Eliahou:** Rabbi Eliahou is a devout Jewish prisoner whose son abandons him in the march to Gleiwitz.
- Zalman:** Zalman is one of Elie's fellow prisoners.
- Meir Katz:** Meir Katz is Chlomo's friend from Buna.
- Stein:** Stein is Elie's relative from Antwerp, Belgium, whom he and his father encounter in Auschwitz.
- Hilda:** Hilda is Eliezer's oldest sister.
- Béa:** Béa is Eliezer's middle sister.
- Tzipora:** Tzipora is Eliezer's youngest sister.

Night

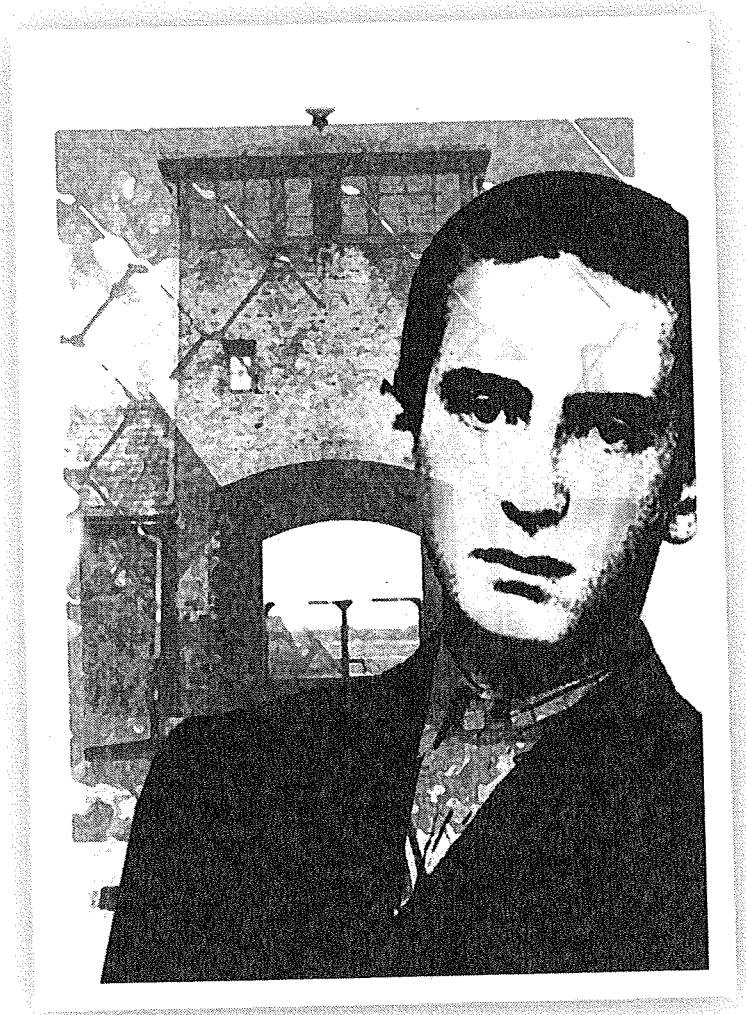
Before We Start
Handout 2

Name _____

Date _____ Hour _____

Synopsis

The novel *Night* by Elie Wiesel is unique in its perspective of the Holocaust. Wiesel recounts his actual experiences as a teenager suffering the extreme conditions in the concentration camps of World War II. Wiesel and his family endure both physical and emotional torture at the hands of Hitler's officers in the death camps. In the end, Elie witnesses the death of his family, as well as the death of his innocence.



Vocabulary Definition List

The following list provides definitions for some of the more difficult words in the text.

Section 1

waiflike:

resemble someone, usually a young person, with a thin fragile appearance who looks needy

divinity:

the quality associated with being God, a god, or a goddess

encumber:

to burden or weigh down somebody or something; to hamper or impede

insignificant:

not important

mysticism:

the belief that personal communication or union with the divine is achieved through intuition, faith, ecstasy, or sudden insight rather than through rational thought

unsentimental:

not emotional; unaffected by emotional matters

indulgently:

in a permissive, tolerant, way, such as to humor somebody's wishes

initiation:

action that causes something, especially an important process or event, to begin

conviction:

firmly held belief

lorries:

large vehicles for transporting goods by road

deportee:

somebody who has been or is waiting to be deported

fascist:

somebody who supports or advocates a system of government characterized by dictatorship, centralized control of private enterprise, repression of all opposition, and extreme nationalism

ghetto:

an area of a city lived in by a minority group, especially a run-down and densely populated area lived in by a group that experiences discrimination

anecdote:

a short personal account of an incident or event

pathetic:

provoking or expressing feelings of pity

truncheon:

a baton carried as a symbol of rank or authority; a police officer's club

indiscriminately:

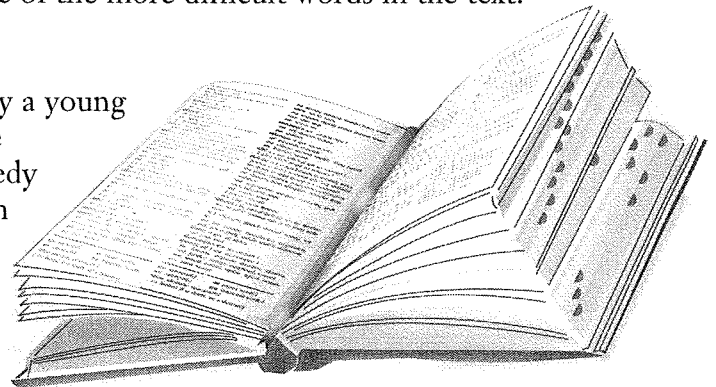
in a random, haphazard, or confused manner

expulsion:

the forcing out of something or somebody from something

pillage:

to steal goods using force, especially during a war



Section 2

hermetically:	so tightly or perfectly fitting as to exclude the passage of air
pious:	devoutly religious
abyss:	a chasm or gorge so deep or vast that its extent is not visible
pestilential:	likely to cause a contagious disease or to be infected with one
barometer:	something that indicates an atmosphere or mood
abominable:	extremely repugnant or offensive
anguish:	extreme anxiety or emotional torment
monotonous:	uninteresting or boring as a result of being repetitive and unvaried
bewildered:	extremely confused
invalids:	people unable to care for themselves due to weakness or illness

Section 3

petrified:	immobile with terror
sage:	somebody who is regarded as knowledgeable, wise, and experienced, especially a man of advanced years revered for his wisdom and good judgment
notorious:	well-known for some undesirable feature, quality, or act
monocle:	an eyeglass for correcting the vision of one eye, held in position by the muscles around the eye socket
crematory:	a building or furnace where bodies are incinerated
tolerate:	to recognize other people's right to have different beliefs or practices without an attempt to suppress them
lucidity:	clarity of thought or speech
kapos:	trustees or guards chosen from the prisoners
improvise:	to act or compose something, especially a sketch, play, song, or piece of music, without any preparation or set text to follow
oppressive:	imposing a harsh or cruel form of domination
harangue:	to criticize or question somebody or try to persuade somebody to do something in a forceful angry way
leprous:	having a skin disease that is highly infectious; untouchable
congealing:	becoming thick and solid or causing a liquid to thicken and solidify
blandishments:	flattery and enticements used to persuade somebody to do something
lavatories:	rooms or buildings with washing and toilet facilities
unremittingly:	in a continuing, persisting, or recurring way
humanity:	the human race considered as a whole; kindness or compassion for others
infernal:	so wicked or cruel as to be worthy of hell
nocturnal:	occurring at night, as opposed to during the day
bestial:	lacking normal human feelings of pity or remorse

Section 4

epidemic:	outbreak of a disease that spreads more quickly and more extensively among a group of people than would normally be expected
keen:	quick to understand things
quarantine:	a place in which people or animals spend a period of isolation to prevent the spread of disease
cynical:	doubting or contemptuous of human nature or of the motives, goodness, or sincerity of others
innumerable:	too many to be counted
emigrate:	to leave a place, especially a native country, to go and live in another country
queue:	to form a line while waiting for something
extraction:	the taking away or getting rid of something
relieve:	temporary relief from something harmful, especially danger or pain
alleged:	claimed but not yet proven to have taken place, have been committed, or be as described
defiance:	open, bold, or hostile refusal to obey or conform
inadequate:	failing to reach an expected or required level or standard
gallows:	a wooden frame, usually made of two upright posts and a crossbeam with a noose attached, used to execute people by hanging
cleft:	split or divided
pipel:	German for a young apprentice or assistant, in this case an assistant to the Kapos

Section 5

solemn:	demonstrating sincerity and gravity
prostrate:	to lie flat on the face or bow very low, for example, in worship or humility
tempest:	a severe storm with very high winds and often rain, hail, or snow
mirage:	something that is unreal or merely imagined
lamentation:	an act or expression of grief or sorrow
countenance:	somebody's face or the expression on it
interminable:	so long and boring or frustrating as to seem endless
emaciated:	extremely thin, especially because of starvation or illness
avidly:	in an eager, dedicated, or enthusiastic manner
feeble:	lacking physical or mental strength or health
crucible:	the hollow part at the bottom of a furnace where molten metal collects
derision:	contempt and mockery
monochrome:	using or displaying only shades of one color or black and white
amid:	surrounded by things or people

liberate:	to release an individual, group, population, or country from political or military control or from any severe physical constraint
mystic:	somebody who practices or believes in mysticism
benediction:	a prayer asking for God's blessing, usually at the end of a service
meager:	unsatisfactory in quantity, substance, or size

Section 6

automaton:	somebody who resembles a machine by obeying instructions automatically, performing repetitive actions or showing no emotion
indeterminate:	without any exact or definite limits
bereaved:	having lost a loved one through death
conscientiously:	in a way which is governed by or done according to somebody's sense of right and wrong
apathy:	lack of interest in anything or the absence of any wish to do anything; lack of enthusiasm or energy
vigilance:	watchfulness, attention
scouring:	looking over thoroughly in search of somebody or something
embarkation:	going on board or putting or taking somebody or something on board a ship or aircraft
convoy:	a group of vehicles or ships traveling together, often with an escort for protection

Section 7

inert:	not moving or able to move
dregs:	the last remaining and often least attractive part of something
spectacle:	an object, phenomenon, or event that is seen or witnessed, especially one that is impressive, unusual, or disturbing
stampede:	an uncontrolled surging rush of a crowd of people
robust:	strong, healthy, and hardy in constitution
contagion:	the transmission of disease, especially by physical contact between persons or contact with infected objects such as bedding or clothing
simultaneously:	at the same time
distinguish:	to be the feature or characteristic that shows that one person, group, or thing is different from another

Section 8

vulnerable:	open to emotional or physical danger or harm
cauldron:	a large metal pot in which liquids are boiled
plaintive:	expressing sadness or sounding sad
beseech:	to ask earnestly or beg somebody to do something
visionary:	characterized by unreal or fanciful ideas

Vocabulary Definition List

spasmodically: in an uneven matter, prone to sudden bursts of energy
summons: an authoritative demand to appear at a particular place for a particular purpose
timid: demonstrating a lack of courage or self-assurance

Section 9

provisions: supplies of food and other things required, especially for a journey
resistance: an illegal secret organization that fights for national freedom against an occupying power, especially one that fought in France, the Netherlands, Denmark, or Italy during World War II

Pre-Reading Questions

Pre-reading questions help you explore your views in order to uncover important themes in the novel.

Directions: Write down your response to each of the questions below. *Keep this handout.* You will need it after you finish the novel.

1. Would you ever, under any circumstances, do anything to harm one of your parents or a family member?
2. Are there times when it is best to stay silent when you see something that is wrong?
3. Are people who stay around other people who commit crimes just as guilty as those who commit the crime?
4. Would you do anything in order to live? How about to help someone you love live?
5. Are there some groups of people in your country that are a major problem to our society?

DID YOU KNOW

The year *Night* was published, 1960, Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was also published.

Name _____

Date _____ Hour _____

Novel Road Map to Success

These questions help you stay on track with the plot as well as build your reading comprehension.

Directions: Answer these questions on a separate piece of paper as you read.

Section 1

1. Describe the character Moshe the Beadle.
2. How old is Elie at the end of 1941?
3. Describe Elie's family.
4. Explain how Moshe has changed.
5. What do you think Moshe means when he tells Elie that he has come to tell the story of his death?
6. Why doesn't Elie's father request permits to Palestine so that the family can live in Sighet?
7. What is viewed as the "death's head"?
8. What was the bad news that Elie's father had to tell the people of the ghetto communities?
9. How does Elie describe the ghetto once the people had been deported?
10. Whom does Elie first begin to hate and why?

Section 2

1. What are the conditions like inside the cattle wagons?
2. Describe Madame Schächter's situation.
3. What is it that Madame Schächter thinks she sees?
4. What is the effect of Madame Schächter's screams on the passengers in the cattle wagon?
5. Why do you think the reaction of Madame Schächter's son upsets Elie so much?
6. What is the final destination of the cattle wagons?

Section 3

1. What is left on the train along with the deportees' cherished items?
2. How is it that Elie and his father survive the first selection off the train?
3. Why do the young Jewish men with knives not attack the SS?
4. What is the most important goal for Elie as he enters into the camp?
5. Why does Elie thank God for mud?
6. What choice does each man have at Auschwitz?
7. What advice does the Polish prisoner in charge of their barrack give before they are allowed to lie down in a bunk?
8. What is the significance of A-7713?

9. What does Akiba Drumer say is the reason for why they are experiencing such brutality?
10. To what new camp do Elie and his father go?

Section 4

1. What is Elie's first impression of the camp at Buna?
2. What does the dentist look for in the mouths of the prisoners?
3. What excuse does Elie give to the dentist so that he won't take out his gold crown?
4. What part of Elie's body alone is aware of "the passage of time"?
5. Why does Idek beat Elie's father? What is Elie's first reaction as the beating is taking place?
6. What is the punishment Idek gives Elie for leaving the area assigned to him to work?
7. Who bombs the camp at Buna?
8. Why is the pipel hanged?
9. What is the reputation of the pipel and the fifty-second cable unit?
10. What makes the hanging of the pipel different from the other hangings the prisoners have witnessed?

Section 5

1. What is the importance of Rosh Hashanah, according to the text?
2. What does Elie see and feel with his "eyes wide open"?
3. What question is "hotly debated" regarding Yom Kippur — The Day of Atonement?
4. According to the veterans of Buna, how has the camp changed in the past few years as far as conditions for the prisoners?
5. In a better world, Elie could imagine a universe without what?
6. What is the "inheritance" Elie's father gives to him if he does not survive the second selection?
7. Elie must have surgery for what reason?
8. What is ironic in the statement, "I've got more faith in Hitler than in anyone else. He's the only one who's kept his promises, all his promises, to the Jewish people"?
9. What is ironic about the choice Elie and his father make concerning staying in the hospital or evacuating with the others in his unit?
10. Why is the wooden floor of the block cleaned before they leave?

Section 6

1. What are the overall conditions of the march to the next camp?
2. Why can't Zalman continue to march?
3. How does the presence of his father give Elie the strength to continue the march?
4. The image that Elie has of the Rabbi Eliahou's son running away from his father in the snowy march initiates a prayer. Explain the importance of the prayer.
5. Why is the violin so important to Juliek?
6. What is the importance of Juliek's playing of Beethoven's concerto?

7. To what does Elie refer when he says he saw the “strange overwhelming little corpse”?
8. How do the prisoners appease their thirst while waiting for the train to arrive?

Section 7

1. Why does Elie say, “there was no more reason to live, no more reason to struggle” when he wakes up to a snow covered, open cattle car?
2. Why does Elie, some years later, ask a lady not to throw money out to the poor?
3. How is the passage describing the fight over the piece of bread in the open cattle car one of both horror and sadness?
4. What camp do Elie and his father end up going to?

Section 8

1. Why is Elie angry with his father right after they debark from the train at the camp?
2. What thoughts does Elie have concerning his father, and why does he feel ashamed?
3. What is Elie’s father dying of?
4. In what ways does Elie try to help his father while he is sick?
5. What happens to Elie’s father when he continues to ask for water?
6. What do you think Elie means when he says, “free at last” concerning his father’s death?

Section 9

1. How does Elie feel after the death of his father?
2. Why do the Germans decide to “liquidate” Buchenwald and evacuate the prisoners?
3. What stops the final evacuation of prisoners from the camp?
4. What is the first act of the prisoners after the first Americans begin arriving?
5. What stares back at Elie at the end of the novel?

