

# Elie Wiesel's "Night"

## A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

### Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <https://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/elie-wiesels-night>.

### Introduction

Elie Wiesel's memoir *Night* (1960) is arguably one of the most important contributions to Holocaust memorialization. This moving account tells the story of Wiesel and his father's experiences in two concentration camps: Auschwitz and Buchenwald. *Night* was first penned in Yiddish under the title *...Un di velt hot geshvign (...And the World Remained Silent)*, and it was published in 1956 in Buenos Aires as part of *Dos poylishe yidntum (Polish Jewry)*, a 175-volume series of Yiddish memoirs of Poland and the war. Since then, it has been translated into thirty languages, and it is frequently taught in American high school English classes. Wiesel has been internationally recognized for promoting Holocaust awareness and, in 1986, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. This kit offers resources for teaching *Night* in its sociohistorical and literary contexts, for close-reading and analyzing specific passages, and, more broadly, for introducing students to Holocaust testimonial literature.

Cover image: Photograph of the Auschwitz I gate, photographer and date unknown.

### Subjects

Holocaust, Memoir, Yiddish, Anti-Semitism, Childhood, Translation

### Reading and Background

- For a short biography on Elie Wiesel, see [the biographical information](#) provided as a supplement for his Nobel Peace Prize.
- For scholarly discussions of *Night*, see *Elie Wiesel's Night* ed. Harold Bloom (Infobase Publishing, 2010) and Ruth Franklin, "The Kabbalists in the Death Camps: Elie Wiesel," in *A Thousand Darknenses: Lies and Truth in Holocaust Fiction* (Oxford University Press, 2013).
- For more resources on teaching *Night*, consider Simone Gigliotti, "Night and the Teaching of History," in *Approaches to Teaching Wiesel's Night*, ed. Alan Rosen (Modern Language Association, 2007).
- Visit the [Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center's Elie Wiesel collection](#) for videos and archival materials on *Night* and Wiesel's life.
- [The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's website](#) offers comprehensive materials to learn more about the Holocaust.
- To listen to Wiesel's Nobel Prize acceptance speech, visit [the Nobel Prize website](#).
- Note: resource 4 of this kit focuses on an excerpt from *The Oprah Winfrey Show* episode featuring Wiesel's 2006 trip back to Auschwitz with Oprah Winfrey. The episode begins by providing important background information about the Holocaust, which might be helpful for introducing a unit on *Night*.

### Resources

1: Text excerpt, the opening of Elie Wiesel's "...Un di velt hot geshvign," 1956, with the English translation from the preface of "Night," 2006.

Elie Wiesel's original memoir in Yiddish, *...Un di velt hot geshvign*, numbered 245 pages in length, and was published in Argentina in 1956 as part of the *Dos poylishe yidntum (Polish Jewry)* series. It was translated into French in 1958 with the help of writer François Mauriac, and was pared down to 178 pages. The English version of the text, published in 1960, was translated from the French (rather than the Yiddish) and further condensed to 116 pages. While Wiesel was minimally involved in the original English translation, his wife, Marion Wiesel, translated the 2006 edition of *Night*, which included some corrections and updates.



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This passage is the opening of Elie Wiesel's memoir as it appeared in the original Yiddish text ...*Un di velt hot geshvign* (1956). The translation of the Yiddish is Elie Wiesel's own, included in the preface to *Night*.

**Suggested Activity:** Read the excerpt from ...*Un di velt hot geshvign*. Ask students to compare it to the way the memoir opens in English, with the story of Moishe the Beadle in *Night* (pages 3-7 in the 2006 Hill & Wang edition.) What are the main differences? What are the themes in the opening of the Yiddish original versus the English adaptation? What is the tone of each? Why might the Yiddish and English versions of the memoir begin differently?

**Sources:** Elie Wiesel, ...*Un di velt hot geshvign* (Buenos Aires: *Tsentral-Farband fun Poylishe Yidn in Argentine*, 1956), 7.

Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill & Wang, 2006), x-xi.

### 3: Back cover, Elie Wiesel's "Night," Hill & Wang edition, 2006.

The two one-sentence reviews on the back cover of *Night* point to the complex task of defining and describing Holocaust testimony. In particular, these reviews demonstrate how genre can define and delimit the interpretation of a text.

**Suggested Activity:** First, ask students to write their own one-line reviews of *Night*. Students can then compare and contrast their reviews. Next, ask students to examine the back cover of the Hill & Wang edition and to read the two one-line reviews found there. How are the reviews similar to and different from each other, and from the ones the students wrote? Ask students to break into two groups for a debate. Assign the genre "art" to one group and "document" to another. Ask each group to argue that *Night* is either "art" or "document." Then bring the students back together for a group discussion. Ask them to consider the following: What are the advantages or disadvantages of classifying *Night* as "art" or "document"? How does it change our perception of the text? How do we engage with "art" and "documents" differently? Are the two categories mutually exclusive? If *Night* is indeed a document, is it "beyond criticism," as A. Alvarez says in his one-line review?

**Source:** Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill & Wang, 2006), back cover.

### 4: Video excerpts, "The Oprah Winfrey Show," 2006, and Alain Resnais's "Night and Fog," 1956.

The first excerpt is a clip from a 2006 episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in which Elie Wiesel and Oprah Winfrey visited Auschwitz together. The clip introduces viewers to some of Wiesel's experiences in the concentration camp and shows them archival images of the camp.

The second excerpt is from the canonical Holocaust documentary *Night and Fog*. Alain Resnais's documentary film uses archival footage, as well as images of the present day, to depict the horrors of the Holocaust. The full film is available through the University of Miami School of Communication on [vimeo](#).

Note: both clips in this resource contain graphic and disturbing images, and students should be given warning before viewing them.

**Suggested Activity:** Watch the videos and ask students to analyze them side-by-side, focusing specifically on the sound, color, and camera movement in these excerpts. How are the two video excerpts different? Which emotions do they evoke? Is one excerpt more unsettling than the other, and why? How is archival material used in each, and do you think the archival material is necessary or effective? Why or why not? For a closer reading, ask students to focus on the depictions of prisoners in each video excerpt. What does each clip focus on about prisoners' experiences in the camps?

**Sources:** *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, Episode 20219. The Oprah Winfrey Network, May 24, 2006. Footage courtesy of Harpo, Inc.

*Night and Fog*, dir. by Alain Resnais. France: Argos Films, 1956.

### 5: Text excerpts, Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman's "Testimony," 1992, and Michael Silverblatt's "The Cultural Relief of Art Spiegelman: A Conversation with Michael Silverblatt," 1992.

When recalling experiences related to a large-scale historical event, memoirists face a number of challenges; most urgent,

perhaps, is the need to secure the trust of their audience so that their accounts will be read in the first place. Concerned that their entire testimony will be discounted if there is a single error, memoirists make a sustained effort to avoid mistakes and inaccuracies. Memoirists are also aware that their accounts can be read against the historical record. Indeed, Holocaust deniers are quick to point out testimonies that do not align with the facts *per se*, and subsequently negate both memoirs and history books in one fell swoop. Given the prevalence of Holocaust denial, some historians have been wary of testimony, anxious that these personal recollections could undermine, rather than support, the facts that have been established.

Like memoirists, literary critics also think about the roles that truth and authenticity play in the production and reception of Holocaust memoirs. Critics Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub have played an important role in the growth of Holocaust studies as an academic field within literature departments, and their scholarship tackles some of the complexities of Holocaust representation.

Art Spiegelman also integrates some of these anxieties about accuracy and truth into his graphic novel *Maus*, winner, in 1992, of an American Book Award and a Pulitzer Prize. In *Maus*, Spiegelman recounts his father's Holocaust experiences as well as the difficulties of representing his father's story.

**Suggested Activity:** Ask students to gather into groups and analyze the excerpt from Laub and Felman's text regarding testimonial inaccuracies. Ask students if they agree with the historians or with the psychoanalyst and why. Then, share this Art Spiegelman's quote with the students. Ask them to think about Elie Wiesel's preface to *Night* (Hill & Wang, 2006) as well, where he frames the new translation of the book as an opportunity to correct and revise "a number of important details" in the memoir. Ask students: do mistakes matter in testimony? Why or why not? Why might memoirists be particularly afraid of making a mistake? Highlight that Holocaust deniers frequently undermine Holocaust testimony by pointing to factual errors. Ask students: must mistakes or inaccuracies be negative? Or can mistakes somehow contribute to a fuller picture of history? If students were to write their own memoirs, to what extent would they be concerned about making mistakes? To what extent would they be able to avoid errors? What is the substance of memoir and how important are facts? Is establishing fact more important in certain contexts than in others?

**Sources:** Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 59-60.

Michael Silverblatt, "The Cultural Relief of Art Spiegelman: A Conversation with Michael Silverblatt" in *Art Spiegelman: Conversations*, ed. Joseph Wittek (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 131.

## 6: Text excerpt from Elie Wiesel and Jorge Semprún's "Se taire est impossible," 1995, and audio clip from Elie Wiesel's lecture "From Holocaust to Rebirth," 1970.

Holocaust survivors frequently talk about the responsibility to "bear witness." Yet, just as often, they reference the difficulty or impossibility of speaking about their experiences in the Holocaust. This activity focuses on how survivors perceive the task of testifying to their Holocaust experiences. Jorge Semprún is a concentration camp survivor best known for his memoir *L'écriture ou la vie (Literature or Life)*, 1994.

**Suggested Activity:** As a warm-up, ask students to consider the reasons why someone might choose to bear witness to a catastrophic experience. Write this list of possible reasons on the board (e.g., personal responsibility, religious imperative, psychological release). Then give students this excerpt from *Se taire est impossible*, and play the audio excerpt from Wiesel's 1970 lecture. Ask the students: according to Wiesel and Semprún, what are their reasons for writing about their experiences? What do they mean when they say that "speech is impossible"? Are there aspects of the Holocaust, or of life in general, that are "unspeakable"? If yes, how so? What does "unspeakable" or "impossible" mean in this context?

**Sources:** Elie Wiesel and Jorge Semprún, *Se taire est impossible* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), 17, 36-37. Unpublished translation by Charlotte F. Werbe.

Elie Wiesel, "From Holocaust to Rebirth," (Lecture, Montreal Jewish Public Library, November 14, 1970).