

Teaching *Night*: Humanizing the Story of the Holocaust

This article offers suggestions for teaching Night in ways that engage students, challenge them to think critically, but most importantly enable them to develop empathy for the victims of the Holocaust, thereby combatting Elie Wiesel's archenemy—indifference.

[T]he opposite of life is not death, it's indifference.

—Elie Wiesel, "One Must Not Forget"

Shortly after winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986, Elie Wiesel told an interviewer, "The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference" ("One Must Not Forget" 68). Wiesel spent his long life battling indifference, "the epitome of evil." Even though he often claimed that no words were adequate to describe the horror of the Holocaust, he was nevertheless a prolific writer. *Night*, his first memoir, was perhaps his most effective and powerful statement intended to shock its readers out of indifference.

Today, *Night* is probably the most commonly taught work of Holocaust literature in the United States, read by middle school and high school students alike, even though US adolescents were not the author's intended audience. Having vowed to remain silent for ten years before writing about his experiences in Auschwitz, Wiesel pared down his 882-page memoir to its essence, publishing *And the World Remained Silent* in Yiddish, his mother tongue, in 1956. Two years later, the book was translated into French as *La Nuit*. *Night* was first published in English in 1960 but not read widely until the 1990s. When Oprah Winfrey chose *Night* for her book club in 2006, sales skyrocketed and a new edition was released. This is the version most students read today

(Echoes & Reflections). What do these students make of this spare and harrowing account of how a Hungarian teenager survived the Holocaust?

Unfortunately, too many react with what Simone Schweber called "'Holocaust fatigue,' the sense that 'this particular event is being taught to death'" (46). By the time students meet *Night*, it is likely that they have previously encountered some form of Holocaust education in multiple grades. Additionally, as the Holocaust recedes into the past, students' knowledge of its historical context can be woefully inadequate, frustrating teachers who find themselves spending more and more time just helping to build basic background knowledge.

We can think of no more appropriate place than this themed issue devoted to "Death in the English Classroom" to offer some suggestions for teaching *Night* in ways that engage students, challenge them to think critically, but most importantly enable them to develop empathy for the victims of the Holocaust, thereby transcending Wiesel's archenemy—indifference: "If the Jews had been able to think they had allies outside, men who did not look the other way, perhaps they might have acted differently. But the only people interested in the Jews were the Germans. The others preferred not to look, not to hear, not to know. The solitude of the Jews, caught in the clutches of the beast, has no precedent in history. It was total. Death guarded all the exits" (*Legends* 189).

Teaching about the Holocaust

We are two English teachers committed to Holocaust education. Liz is a professor of English education; Brandi is an experienced high school English teacher. We have both benefited greatly from the numerous professional development opportunities afforded to us, especially by Echoes & Reflections, a multimedia Holocaust education program developed by three world leaders in Holocaust education—the Anti-Defamation League, the USC Shoah Foundation, and Yad Vashem International School for Holocaust Studies. In this article, we draw on ideas and strategies developed and recommended by Echoes & Reflections, as well as other Holocaust education organizations. The strategies we describe have been used with high school students and adults. Middle school teachers would need to make developmentally appropriate adaptations.

According to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), “The Holocaust provides one of the most effective subjects for examining basic moral issues . . . for an investigation into human behavior . . . [and for] examin[ing]

Wiesel knew, as do most teachers of literature, that adolescents are ready and eager to explore the great moral and ethical questions of humanity through the safe conduit of books.

what it means to be a responsible citizen” (“Why Teach?”). This comprehensive rationale omits what Shulamit Imber, pedagogical director of the International School for Holocaust Studies at Yad Vashem, calls the “human story”: “We believe that the aim of the educator must be to ‘see’ the victim as an individual rather

than as a statistic, and to communicate this idea to students. Doing so evokes a sense of empathy with the victims, as they become real people with human identities and aspirations” (1). *Night* is above all a human story.

The USHMM has also published “Guidelines for Teaching about the Holocaust.” Particularly relevant to teaching *Night* is the advice to contextualize events in history. It is not necessary to give students a complete grounding in the history of the Holocaust, but some background is fundamental to understanding *Night*. For example, students need to understand the role anti-Semitism played in the Holocaust. One excellent, free resource for teaching and learning on this topic is the University of

Southern California Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education. IWitness is an educational website that gives access to more than 2,000 video testimonies of survivors and witnesses of the Holocaust and other genocides. The archive is searchable by topic (e.g., anti-Semitism; Auschwitz, liberation). For example, students can hear Holocaust survivor Barbara Fischman Traub describe her experience of being herded to the ghetto in Sighet, Elie Wiesel’s hometown, while neighbors looked on with indifference. Wiesel himself described the experience in his memoir: “They ordered us to run. We began to run. Who would have thought we were so strong? From behind their windows, from behind their shutters, our fellow citizens watched as we passed” (19).

Students also need to understand that European Jews experienced the Holocaust in different ways. The experiences of Jews in Hungary differed from the experiences of those elsewhere. The USHMM has a section of resources devoted to teaching *Night* and understanding the contexts of Wiesel’s experience, including maps, history, timelines, and a bibliography. Another stunning primary source for learning about the fate of Hungarian Jews is “The Auschwitz Album,” a unique and tragic artifact owned by Yad Vashem. This photo album, recovered from Auschwitz after its liberation, documents the arrival of a transport of Hungarian Jews in May 1944. Yad Vashem shares the album through a permanent online exhibition of photos, such as Figure 1, that graphically support Wiesel’s description of his arrival at Auschwitz in eight shattering words: “Men to the left! Women to the right!” (29).

Dealing with Death in the English Curriculum

In his preface to the 2006 edition of *Night*, Wiesel pondered one reason he may have written the book: “to preserve a record of the ordeal I endured as an adolescent, at an age when one’s knowledge of death and evil should be limited to what one discovers in literature?” (vii). Wiesel knew, as do most teachers of literature, that adolescents are ready and eager to explore the great moral and ethical questions of humanity through the safe conduit of books.

This year prior to beginning our unit on *Night*, I (Brandi) had my students freewrite in response to

FIGURE 1. Screen shot from "The Auschwitz Album," "Visual Evidence of the Process Leading to the Mass Murder at Auschwitz" (Yad Vashem).



the following guiding questions: "What experience do you have with death?" "How did or does it affect you?" "Do you feel it's important to discuss within the classroom aside from reading about it?" While a handful stated that discussing death in the classroom made them feel uncomfortable or found it depressing, most students recognized the discussion to be beneficial in understanding and processing death. Many wrote things like, "If we did not talk about death how are we supposed to learn? Death is always going to be there." A few even included the Holocaust in their answers. One student wrote: "I don't feel too apprehensive about talking about death in the classroom. It assures that students know that death occurs, and also so the Holocaust isn't forgotten." This informal assessment gave me an idea of what sort of experiences they brought with them and of how they might react to the topic when discussing it in class.

Death is a running motif in the English curriculum, but we rarely engage students in in-depth discussion about it. Perhaps we have become so focused on teaching skills that we fear that heartfelt and exploratory discourse may be wasting time. Perhaps we are reluctant to engage a topic that ventures into the territory of religion. Perhaps we don't want students to leave our classrooms feeling depressed. Yet almost every literary work we teach involves

death. Usually, we treat it as just one more event on a plot diagram: Romeo drinks poison; Juliet stabs herself; end of story. In the literary canon, such deaths are generally warranted by a tragic character flaw like hubris. No simple explanation suffices for the mass murder of innocent Jews in the Holocaust.

Death is ever-present in Holocaust literature, forcing us to ask: What is worth dying for? Is living always better than dying? Why do some survive and others die? Why do innocent people die? How does one face death? How does one live when surrounded by death? Lawrence Langer called the dilemmas confronting those surrounded by death "choiceless choice[s], where critical decisions did not reflect options between life and death, but between one form of 'abnormal' response and another, both imposed by a situation that was in no way of the victim's choosing" (224). We see examples of choiceless choices throughout *Night*, for example, when Eliezer's father refuses the offer of safe shelter from the transport (20), when Eliezer watches the Kapo beat his father and does not intervene (54), when Eliezer and his father "choose" to be evacuated rather than remain in the camp (82), when Eliezer climbed into his bunk rather than remain with his father (112).

Unlike history teachers, who have played a dominant role in teaching the facts of the Holocaust,

we English teachers have the opportunity to help students raise and explore these fundamental questions. Alan Rosen has described the unique contribution literature makes to our understanding of the Holocaust:

If history has sought objectivity, . . . literature has been shamelessly subjective, offering ardently personal perspectives on what transpired . . . if history has generally concerned itself with the macro level—the group, the institution, the movement—literature has focused on the individual. It is via the individual that empathy comes to the fore. (2)

Activities to Build Empathy

To build empathy in my classroom, I (Brandi) implemented a photo narrative activity, adapted from a lesson plan developed by the USHMM (“Photo Narrative Activity”). I broke my students up into small groups and gave them 20 photos pertaining to the Holocaust. These photos ranged from pictures of children sledding, concentration camp barracks, Nazi party rallies, liberation, to piles of shoes or prisoners in their striped uniforms. I did not include grisly photos, such as piles of victims’ bodies or people being murdered, as students are already far too familiar with such shocking images. I removed captions and dates from the photos and provided each group with scissors, a poster, markers, and glue. I instructed them to construct a timeline of the events of the Holocaust using only 6 of the 20 photos (6 because that is the number of photos that fit neatly on a large piece of chart paper). Students were to glue them in order, give their timeline a unique title, and write a caption under each photo. On completion of their poster, each group wrote a short reflection on their process and their assessment of how well their poster represented their understanding of the Holocaust. I then gave each student a few sticky notes and we did a gallery walk, with students jotting down observations, questions, and comments on the notes. We used the posters, the group reflections, and sticky notes to hold a discussion of our perceptions of and questions about the Holocaust.

I conducted the same activity after reading *Night* and on completion of the Holocaust unit. Students were not allowed to look at the timelines

they had previously made until they had completed the new one. I found that the major difference between the pre- and the post-unit timeline was the shift from a focus on death to a focus on life. Pre-unit, students often chose photos of Hitler, piles of shoes, or prisoners in striped uniforms. Post-unit, students tended to choose the photos that illustrated life, such as the sledding and liberation photos. Often, students used some of the same photos but changed the captions. For example, a photo of a woman walking with belongings and her children is no longer headed in the direction of a camp, but instead headed in the direction of life. The shift in their photo selections illustrates a critical lesson about the Holocaust: to understand death, we must first understand life.

In summer 2016 I attended a seminar for teachers sponsored by Echoes & Reflections at the International School of Holocaust Studies at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, Israel. While there I completed an activity that I will adapt and use with my students. Yad Vashem memorializes Jewish victims of the Holocaust by collecting Pages of Testimony, which contain the bare facts of an individual’s life and death and often include a photograph. More than 2.7 million Pages of Testimony have been submitted and are currently stored in the Holocaust History Museum’s Hall of Names. I was assigned a partner and a Page of Testimony and instructed to research and present that individual’s life via eight PowerPoint slides.

We received guiding questions asking us to describe where the person lived, what his or her daily routine might have been like, what family and social life was like, what the person enjoyed doing in his or her spare time. Nowhere did the instructions ask us to focus on the death of this person or describe his or her experiences in relation to the Shoah; however, most of us did just that. I was shocked when the first group presented: they told a story of life in such a detailed fashion that I found myself visualizing the person enjoying a family dinner on Shabbat and playing music in their spare time with friends and family. I don’t know if the presenters even mentioned how the individual perished. My partner and I gave the presentation we had prepared, but when we finished I explained that this assignment had opened my eyes to just how much we emphasize death when it comes to the Holocaust, and how

important it is to rewire ourselves and our students to focus on life. The Holocaust wasn't the murder of six million Jews as a whole, but murder committed six million individual times.

To implement this assignment, a teacher would need to access Yad Vashem's database of Pages of Testimony and choose pages appropriate for students. This will take some digging, as the Pages are in multiple languages with differing amounts of information. But once a set of Pages is identified, it can be used over and over. Students would use the basic information the Page provides to research what everyday life was like for that person. Figure 2 is a Page of Testimony for Gregory Shehtman.

Gregory was born in 1934 in Kiev, Ukraine, to Feiga and Haim Shehtman. He was murdered

in September at Babi Yar, Ukraine. What was life like in Kiev, Ukraine? What was Gregory's daily routine? What did he do for fun? What sort of responsibilities was he accountable for? What information can you infer about him from the photograph? What can you infer from the information about the person who submitted the Page of Testimony?

Students would work collaboratively to gather and present their findings to their peers, focusing on the life of the individual, not his or her experience in the Holocaust. This lesson emphasizes focusing on light in the darkness, humanizing the story of the Holocaust, and reinforces that in order to understand the impact of death, we must first understand life.

FIGURE 2. Page of Testimony for Gregory Shehtman from Yad Vashem Central Database of Shoah Victims' Names

YAD VASHEM
Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority
P.O.B. 3477 Jerusalem, Israel

ד"ר יום
עדות בלתי
A Page of Testimony

ד"ר יום
אוספיונים עם אזרחות
מן אוקראינה או גבורה

40991

<p>THE MARTYRS' AND HEROES' REMEMBRANCE LAW, 5713-1973 determines in article No. 2 that — The task of YAD VASHEM is to gather into the historical material regarding all those members of the Jewish people who laid down their lives, who fought and rebelled against the Nazi enemy and his collaborators, and to perpetuate their memory and that of the communities, organizations, and institutions which were destroyed because they were Jewish.</p>	<p>דאס געזעץ צום אנדעק פון אומטום און גבורה — יד ושם, תשי"ג 1953 זעטלט פסס אין פארטראך נומ' 2</p> <p>די אויפגאבע פון יד ושם איז איינצולעגן אין היסטאריע דעם אנדעק פון אלע יידן, וואס (געזען געפאלן האבן זיך פאר נאצי געזעצט און זיך אנטקעגנזעצט דעם נאצי'ן שונא און זיינע אויסשטעלער, און זיי אלעמען, די קהילות, די ארגאניזאציעס און אויסשטייערעס, וועלכע זענען הרוב געווארן צוליב זייער אנגעזעצטקייט צום יידישן פאלק — זעטלט א דענקמאל. (געזעצט'ער נומ' 132, י"ז אלול תשי"ג, 28.8.1953)</p>
	<p>1. פאמיליע נאמען * <u>Shehtman</u></p> <p>2. פארנאמען (פאטערליכע נאמען פאר דער קינדער) <u>Gregory</u></p> <p>3. געבורטס-דאטע <u>~ 1934</u></p> <p>4. ארט פון געבורט (טאטא, לאנד) <u>Kiev, USSR</u></p> <p>5. נאמען פון פאטער <u>Haim Shehtman</u> / נאמען פון מוטער <u>Feiga Rutzman</u></p> <p>6. נאמען פון מוטער <u>Feiga Rutzman</u></p> <p>7. נאמען פון מאן אדער פון פרוי און איר קינדערליכע נאמען <u>Name of spouse (if a wife, add maiden name)</u></p> <p>8. בערוף <u>Profession</u></p> <p>9. שטאט/פלאץ וואוינארט <u>Kiev, USSR</u></p> <p>10. ארט/פלאץ וואוינערטער בעת דער מלחמה <u>Kiev, USSR</u></p> <p>11. ארט, צייט און אומשטענד פון טויט <u>Sept. 1941 Babi Yar, Kiev.</u></p> <p>אין דער אונטערזעצטער רעכענעריי <u>Roedel Gobein</u> וואס וווינט (ס'זייט דער) <u>USA</u> וואס וווינט (ס'זייט דער) <u>2388 Hercules Dr. X.A. Ca. 9006</u> רעכענעריי <u>half-sister (daughter of my mother)</u></p> <p>herby declare that this testimony is correct to the best of my knowledge. דערקלער דערמיט, אז די עדות וואס איך האב דא איבערגעגעבן, מיט אלע פרטים, איז א ריכטיקע לויט מיין בעסטען וויסן.</p> <p>אונטערזעצט <u>R. Gobein</u> ארט און דאטע <u>08.28.98, Los Angeles</u></p>
	<p>..ונתתי להם בביתי ובחומותי יד ושם...אשר לא יכרת ישיש ג'ו ..even unto them will I give in mine house and within my walls a place and a name...that shall not be cut off." (Leviticus, LV.13)</p> <p>* ביים אונטערזעצטן יעדן נאמען פון אומגעטויטעס אידן א באזונדער בלאט. Please inscribe the name of each victim of the Holocaust on a separate form.</p>

Death in Night

Equipped with an adequate understanding of life during the Holocaust, students are better prepared to confront death in the text. Death appears almost immediately. On the third page of the narrative, Moishe the Beadle returns from exile with the unbelievable tale of a massacre in a forest: Jews dug their own graves! After that, events happen quickly: "The race toward death had begun" (10). Still, no one really believes what is coming, and Wiesel, the wiser adult, looks back upon Wiesel, the naive child, in his parenthetical expressions: "The yellow star? So what? It's not lethal . . ." (Poor father! Of what then did you die?)" (11). Opportunities to escape are missed; the Wiesels, along with all the other inhabitants of Sighet, arrive at Birkenau: "The beloved objects that we had carried with us from place to place were now left behind in the wagon, and with them, finally, our illusions" (29). (Note: The Auschwitz album contains images of the mountains of beloved objects left behind.)


Students can trace the ever-expanding presence of death, until

death itself becomes a character as the inmates are marched out of Buna on the way to Buchenwald: "But death hardly needed their [guards] help. The cold was conscientiously doing its work. At every step, somebody fell down and ceased to suffer" (92). We can also follow how Eliezer's attitude toward death evolves over the course of the book: from a fate to be feared to a welcomed escape. We must witness the specific deaths Wiesel shares with us: the prisoner who stole the soup; the young rebel who cursed the Germans with his last words; the *pipel*, a "sad-eyed angel" (64), a child, too light to expire instantly from hanging, whose death causes the narrator to realize that God has died in Auschwitz; Juliek and his violin, "an eerily poignant little corpse" (95). Most painful of all, the death of Eliezer's father, which we do not see, which Eliezer himself does not see: "His last word had been my name. He had called out to me and I had not answered" (112).

The memoir leaves us with the haunting image of the 16-year-old survivor of Auschwitz-Birkenau, a Death March, and Buchenwald: "From the depths of the mirror, a corpse was contemplating me. The look in his eyes as he gazed at me has never left me" (115). How can a living person be a corpse? What does this mean? Is this the ultimate victory of death over life? We believe Wiesel answers these questions in the 2006 edition by including his Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech. Herein he confronts the young Jewish boy who asks him what he has done with his life:

And then I explain to him how naïve we were, that the world did know and remained silent. And that is why I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere. (118)

Night was not the end; it was just the beginning. This is where conversations about death in the text should lead: to the knowledge that the opposite of life is not death but indifference, and we are required to act on that knowledge. This is how to honor the mantra of Holocaust educators to lead students safely in and safely out of this sorrowful subject.

We believe that participation in a high-quality professional development program, such as those mentioned in this article, is an excellent investment in learning to teach about the Holocaust. If you live in a community with a Holocaust Resource Center, connect with it and take part in its programs. The strategies we have described here—freewriting to tap into students' prior knowledge and experience, using primary sources to create empathy, conducting research to understand the lives of victims—help us to confront death and grief, while reinforcing the preciousness of every life. Wiesel's extraordinary memoir demands that we who are entrusted with teaching *Night* do it justice by leading students to appreciate its literary qualities, its moral and ethical complexity, its heartbreak, and its humanity. 

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

In this lesson plan, working in small groups, students use reciprocal teaching strategies as they read and discuss Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel's memoir *Night*. Everyone in the classroom takes a turn assuming the "teacher" role, as the class works with four comprehension strategies. <http://bit.ly/2syKlXk>

Homecoming

The prodigal son
returned yesterday

draped in the flag
shipped via Army freight

saluted by Taps and
a mother's wailing

as his procession
lumbered across the runway
unphotographed.

There will be no robe or ring.
There will be no feast of fatted calf.

Just some cold cuts and potato salad
back at the church

on Tuesday.

—Mitchell Nobis
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