

Steph Todd

Dr. Mary Warner

Engl 112B

24 November 2019

Unit of Study: Understanding the Holocaust Through Literature

Rationale

The current era of the world is fraught with innumerable news stories involving discrimination-based violence of all sorts. Over the past few decades in the United States alone, white nationalists have vocalized to keep America “white” instead of diverse, neo-Nazi groups have organized violent uprisings like in Charlottesville, Virginia back in 2017, and white supremacists have attacked innocent civilians like in El Paso, Texas this past August. There seems to be more negative news than positive, and that is just within the United States. People in other areas of the world also suffer from violence and hate at the hands of corrupt governments, groups, leaders, or individuals, all at varying degrees of intensity.

These violent tendencies by people who believe they are somehow better than others and wish to eliminate those who don’t quite “make the cut” have become increasingly, horrifyingly often in occurrence. Though the Holocaust of the 1940s ended over seventy years ago, radical ideologies about race, religion, and discrimination of all sorts continue to course through many people today. The aim of this curriculum revolving around Holocaust literature is to engage students with the horrors of the past, but to also provide them with novels of strength and endurance of humans amid one of the darkest times. Humans who are victimized continue to persevere and find hope even when there seems to be none left to find.

The ideas presented in this unit best apply to the tenth grade course of study that typically deals with both American and European literature; likewise, sophomore year also deals with world literature which coincides with what is typically studied that year in history courses. Thus, the canonical Holocaust text of *Night* by Elie Wiesel serves as the core novel this unit of study revolves around.

In the year 1944, Nazi-occupied Europe is well underway. *Night* captures Wiesel's terrifying experience as a young Jewish boy who is taken from his home in Romania to the Auschwitz concentration camp and then to Buchenwald in great detail. The novel deals with Wiesel's moments of observing the inhumanity of Nazi soldiers as well as coping with mortality and realizing the impacts that this genocide may have on the world to come.

This autobiographical, historical nonfiction novel is very much a piece about survival and understanding what the Holocaust is, was, and perhaps if it could ever occur again. This novel, and the other novels in this unit, engage young adults to understand the harsh reality of the world around them, but they also present how even in the midst of devastating cruelty and discrimination, there is always hope for a better tomorrow.

Launching the Unit

Before reading and discussing Wiesel's *Night* with the class, a few pre-activities will help students get into the mindset of dealing with such a heavy topic.

- 1) Play the song "Imagine" by John Lennon, from the album, *Imagine*. Have students listen to the song while simultaneously looking at the lyrics on a handout.
 - a) Have the students highlight key lyrics that strike them as important, and continue with a writing prompt that allows them to write about why those lyrics somehow

move them. Some lyrics to keep in mind include “Imagine there’s no countries /
...And no religion, too / Imagine all the people / Living life in peace.”

- 2) Present a few discussion questions to have the students think deeply about discriminatory ideologies still present in the world today. Have them write their answers to the questions in their journals, and at the end of the sustained, silent writing session, ask the students if any of them feel comfortable sharing their answers.
 - a) Have you ever been discriminated against due to your Ethnicity? Religion? Sexual orientation? Gender? etc. How did that make you feel and why?
 - b) Write about a time where you have thought negatively about someone. Was it because of one of the reasons above? Why do you know now that it was wrong?
 - c) Why is it not okay to discriminate against another for any of these qualities or others that were not listed? Why do you think that others continue to discriminate against people who may be different than them?

- 3) Read the following poems aloud in class that relate to the horrors of World War II. After the students have a chance to read the poems silently as well, discuss which lines in the poems they found particularly poignant and why.
 - a) After the discussion, have the students write a poem anonymously in the same style as Niemöller. Have the students crumple up the poem, place it in a bin, and then have everyone pick a new poem out of the bin. Everyone in the class will get a chance to read the poem they picked out aloud. Hopefully, this exposes the students to hate others see around them. It may give the students a sense of the discrimination and bias that is still evident in today’s world.

<p style="text-align: center;">“First They Came for the Socialists” by Martin Niemöller</p> <p>First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out - because I was not a socialist.</p> <p>Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out - because I was not a trade unionist.</p> <p>Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out - because I was not a Jew.</p> <p>Then they came for me - and there was no one left to speak for me.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">“Death That Need Not Have Been” by Flora Hendricks</p> <p>I feel the loneliness after death, Death that need not have been - I hear the screech of brakes, And see the muddy shoes removed, Lying beside the still form, The too-quick boy, Covered with hempen bags, Flies gathering.</p> <p>It makes the heart sick, As an old moon upsets a morning sky; Or stills the heart As does the shriek of wind through chimneys, Through old cellars, Through attics, Through windows, Rattling through insecure windows.</p> <p>I feel the loneliness after death, Death that need not have been- I hear the muffled cry of millions, The battle shriek in martial music; I hear the scream of bombs And see the small feet flying, Fear-whitened faces staring, Huddled in death, Death that need not have been.</p>
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Working “Through” the Text

As the students read through the canonical text of *Night*, they will have a few activities to keep them engaged and help them critically analyze the novel.

1) Journal of quotes

- a) Each night, the students will be required to read one to two chapters of the novel, and they will be assigned a packet that provides a column designated for finding two quotes from each chapter and another column beside it where the students explain why the quotes are significant or why it intrigued them. Perhaps the

quotes hint at possible themes as well. This activity will keep the students on top of their reading assignments, and it will help them close read and look at the text from an analytical viewpoint.

- b) In class, have students share at least one quote they wrote down, and have them explain their rationale for choosing it along with its analysis.
- 2) “Never shall I forget” art project
- a) There is a moment in the book when young Elie writes of a series of “never shall I forget” sentences. In comparison to the rest of the novel, this moment seems to stand-alone within Wiesel’s experiences at both the Auschwitz concentration camp and at the Buchenwald concentration camp. It evokes quite a bit of imagery. Have the students gather into groups of three and create a piece of artwork that captures these sentences as best they can. This may take a few days to complete. They may take creative liberties with the artwork, but they must not read beyond the text. Hopefully, this activity will stoke critical analysis and allow other students in the classroom to see how everyone views the writing when each group presents their artwork.

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, that turned my life into one long night seven times sealed.
Never shall I forget that smoke.
Never shall I forget the small faces of the children whose bodies I saw transformed into smoke under a silent sky.
Never shall I forget those flames that consumed my faith forever.
Never shall I forget the nocturnal silence that deprived me for all eternity of the desire to live.
Never shall I forget those moments that murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to ashes.
Never shall I forget those things, even were I condemned to live as long as God Himself.
Never.

Elie Wiesel, *Night*, 1958, pg. 34

3) Brown bag activity

- a) After finishing the novel, have students journal about three items they would include in a brown bag that encapsulates the essence of the novel and why those items are pertinent. Items can be tangible things that Wiesel encounters during his experience, or items could be abstract such as hope or perseverance. The students may also include one quote from the novel that captures a particular theme or moment that stood out to them.
- b) Likewise, have students journal about a similar activity for themselves. If they had to choose three items to bring with them in a paper bag, tangible or not, knowing what horrors lie ahead of them, what would they bring and why?

4) *Band of Brothers* Clip from Episode 9

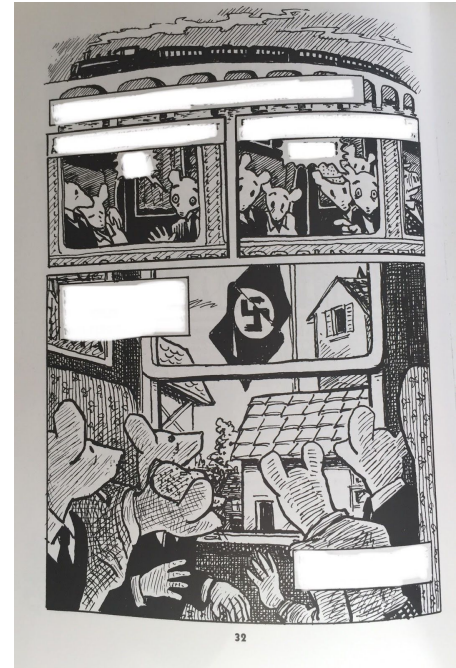
- a) Sometimes a visual can help intensify or solidify what conditions were truly like in such a brutal event like the Holocaust. Though *Night* is quite graphic, visuals can help students further understand the drastic conditions of the concentration camps that millions of people suffered inside. In the clip hyperlinked to YouTube below, an American company of soldiers, known as Easy Company, discover a concentration camp with Jewish people still held hostage inside after the Nazis have abandoned the camp. The viewing of this scene can be optional for students within the class since it can be quite disturbing, traumatizing, and graphic for some viewers.
 - i) https://youtu.be/iZea2_19c7c

Extending the Unit

This piece of the unit allows the students to connect with Holocaust literature outside the canonical text in different ways and via different mediums.

- 1) The students will read the graphic novel *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History* by Art Spiegelman together as a group during class time.

This is another effective way to engage the students since they are quite used to seeing text aligning with visuals through various forms of social media. This allows students to close read the text, narration, and illustrations to better understand the scenes and emotions of the characters.



- a) Before beginning the graphic novel, pick a page that the students can have the opportunity to close read without having yet engaged with the text. Have the students write inside the white-out sections just by carefully observing the context clues of the expressions and setting alone. Allow the students to read aloud what they thought the writing would be inside the quote and narration bubbles before comparing it to the original page. Why is this an important activity to do before working with a graphic novel?
- 2) While the students read the graphic novel together as a group in the class, they will each pick another young adult novel that revolves around the events of the Holocaust to read on their own at home.

- a) Students will have an opportunity to learn a bit more about the books provided while doing a book pass in class. The teacher will bring in a perhaps three to four copies per book and have everyone sit in a circle of seven. There will be one of each of the seven books per circle, and for five minute increments, the students will have the opportunity to learn about each book before passing it on to the student next to them. Once everyone has seen all seven books, they will decide on which book they would like to read outside the classroom. Although the books listed below are not all of the young adult novels focusing on Holocaust events, students are allowed to find other novels to read if they receive prior approval from the teacher.
- b) Once the book has been read, the students will complete a final project that shows their ability to engage with the text and think critically about it as well. They could choose to act out a summary of the book, write a poem highlighting a key theme intermixed with quotes, create a song playlist that represents the tone changes throughout the novel, create a piece of artwork from a particularly important scene, present a monologue from a character's point of view, or write a critical analysis essay about the book. There is a lot of creative liberty the students could take here as long as it is pre-approved.

Young Adult Literature Selections

The Diary of a Young Girl by Anne Frank: In the city of Amsterdam in the early 1940s, Anne Frank and her family are German Jews who hide inside a space called the "Secret Annex" located within her father's warehouse. The Van Daan family and a dentist also share this hiding

space as they all attempt to evade discovery by the Nazis. Anne's diary tells of the stressful situation they are all under and shows the courage of humans in a time filled with fear.

The Book Thief by Markus Zusak: In the year of 1939, Liesel Meminger finds something she cannot resist: books. Amid all of the chaos during the Nazi regime, her foster father helps her learn to read, and Liesel even shares this newfound discovery with a Jewish man hiding in her basement.

Number the Stars by Lois Lowry: During the Danish Resistance in Denmark, thousands of Jewish people are desperately trying to escape to Sweden. The young Annemarie Johansen and her family provide refuge for Annemarie's Jewish friend, Ellen, to hide her true religion from curious Nazis. They all try to escape Denmark together to begin a better life not under Nazi rule.

Resistance by Jennifer A. Nielsen: In the early 1940s, Poland has become a Nazi-occupied place where only two options for Jewish people remain: surrender or resist. Chaya Lindner, an Aryan-featured teen who lives among the chaos, volunteers as a courier for the resistance group Akiva to participate in raids and to smuggle food, documents, supplies, and occasionally people, in and out of ghettos. When an important mission goes awry, all contact cuts off within Chaya's resistance group except for another teen named Esther who informs her that they must venture to Warsaw's Ghetto to fulfill an impossibly dangerous task.

The Auschwitz Escape by Joel C. Rosenberg: Jacob Weisz is a young boy who joins a rebel group that aims to fight back against the Nazi regime. When a raid unexpectedly falls apart, Jacob finds himself heading toward Auschwitz's concentration camp. In the midst of everything,

Jacob is determined to escape the camp to warn others about Adolf Hitler's plan to rid Europe of Jewish people for good before it's too late.

The Devil's Arithmetic by Jane Yolen: Hannah is a young Jewish girl whose family always focuses on the past during Jewish holidays and get-togethers. However, one year, she finds herself transported into the past only to discover the true horrors that occurred in the era of World War II.

The Boy in the Striped Pajamas by John Boyne: In 1942, a young boy named Bruno discovers that his family must relocate to a secluded house in Berlin far away from the city. His new home doesn't provide much entertainment, but Bruno is intrigued by a tall, long-spanning fence in the distance. In search of answers about the unusual fence, Bruno strikes up an unlikely friendship with a young boy on the other side that leads to unimaginable consequences.

Concluding Activities

By the end of this unit, students should have a better understanding of not only the cruel discrimination that occurred during the Holocaust but also a clearer understanding of the resilience of people. For the final activity of the Holocaust unit, students will write their own "never shall I forget" poems about what impacts them in the world today that they will never forget. Perhaps the poems will be negative, or perhaps they will be positive. Students will write a two page rationale about their poem and how this unit of study helped broaden their worldview of the human experience.

Night classifies well as a young adult canonical text since it challenges students to consider global concerns; furthermore, it fits perfectly into chapter eight of Alleen Nilsen et. al's *Literature for Today's Young Adults*: "History and History Makers: Of People and Places." In

this chapter, there are also a multitude of other literary works that could be read within a Holocaust unit of study. *Night* also classifies well into chapters four through seven in Mary Warner's novel, *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning: Tapping the Powerful Resource of Story*, to create a meaningful impact on the students who read it. *Night* involves a real-life experience, and it is a book that has a character who faces death and loss. It also deals with discrimination and with courage and survival. Wiesel's novel not only stands the test of time, but it dares to show the raw truth of the world.

The purpose of Holocaust literature is not to show how terrible humans can be: it is to show that nothing is impossible to overcome. Life is filled with cruelty, discrimination, and more hate than imaginable; however, hope is something that is stronger than fear. There is always hope that people will change. There is always hope that hate turns to love. There is always hope that exclusion based on differences develops into acceptance of differences.

Each text within this unit offers a unique take on life during the Holocaust. Hopefully, this unit provides students with enlightenment of the past and gives them hope for the present and for the future that cruel discrimination, though it still occurs, can be overcome.

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