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English I – Article Reserves

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the book is unsparing in its condemnation of inhumanity. With its haunting themes about evil, horror, and lies, the novel is a reminder that one cannot forget the truth—about the Holocaust and about humans' potential for cruelty.

William Styron, winner of the American Book Award, Howells Medal, Edward MacDowell Medal, and Pulitzer Prize, is not a Jewish survivor of the Holocaust. He is not even Jewish. Moreover, although Sophie's Choice is largely about the Nazi pogrom against the European Jewish community during World War II, Sophie, a survivor of Auschwitz, is not Jewish either. In fact, before the war Sophie's father was a Polish intellectual who had published a harshly anti-Semitic pamphlet. These "facts" should not detract from the truth that the Holocaust was overwhelmingly targeted at the Jewish community and that Jews were most savagely persecuted; these "facts" broaden readers' understanding of the scope of the Nazis' activities.

NIGHT

Whereas Styron's novel is a complex unraveling of a Holocaust story, Elie Wiesel's first-person retrospective is a distilled story about one man's nightmarish experience. Yet despite the differences between the two novels, both describe with amazing power the Nazis' atrocities against the Jews.

Night seems to cross genre lines. In Elie Wiesel, Ted Estess writes:

Night is autobiographical; indeed, Wiesel has said that the story should be read in view of this statement: "I swear that every word is true." But there is a difference between Eliezer of the book and Elie Wiesel the storyteller. The reader's clue to this is the difference in names: the character in the story is "Eliezer," while the storyteller uses the name "Elie." The difference in names relates to Wiesel's recognition that he cannot adequately convey what happened to him and to millions of others. There would inevitably be discrepancies between the story he would tell and the events he suffered. It is more truthful for him to acknowledge this by creating a slight distance between himself and his "character."³

The novel begins with an anecdote about Moshe the Beadle, a man of whom the whole town is fond. A poor man, Moshe is a "past
master in the art of making himself insignificant, of seeming invisible." Moshe teaches the narrator, Eliezer, about religious matters, the mysteries of Hebrew mysticism, and the cabalistic texts:

"And why do you pray, Moshe?" I asked him.

"I pray to the God within me that He will give me the strength to ask Him the right questions." (3)

When the local authorities ban all foreign Jews from this Hungarian town, Moshe is put on a train and taken away. Several months later Moshe returns to the city, and he tries to explain what happened to him and the other deportees. He tells the villagers that the deportees were taken to Poland and made to dig their own mass graves. He explains that the Gestapo then shot them all. Moshe escaped because he had only been shot in the leg and mistaken for dead. But people in the town refuse to listen to him. Such is the narrator's first discovery that things are terribly wrong. More is yet to come.

In the spring of 1944, when the tide of war is turning against Hitler, the Germans arrive. On the seventh day of Passover, the Jewish leaders of the community are arrested. Jews are then forced to wear yellow stars, and all their properties are divested. The narrator goes on to lament, "Then came the ghetto" (9). In the ghetto, life returns to a semblance of normalcy and the community hopes to remain there until the Red Army can rescue them. But eventually time runs out for these Jews, like it has for Jews all over occupied Europe. The ghetto is emptied, and the Jews are deported by train to Birkenau, an annex of Auschwitz. Before the train leaves the station, a Hungarian lieutenant collects their very last possessions.

At their arrival at Auschwitz, the SS immediately take charge, ordering them into lines. Here, the narrator remembers seeing the infamous Dr. Joseph Mengele (who is further described later in this chapter). He describes the encounter:

(a typical SS officer: cruel face, but not devoid of intelligence, and wearing a monocle); a conductor's baton in his hand, he is standing among the other officers. The baton moved unremittingly, sometimes to the right, sometimes to the left.

I am already in front of him:
“How old are you?” he asked, in an attempt at a paternal tone of voice.

“Eighteen.” My voice is shaking.

“Are you in good health?”

“Yes.”

“What’s your occupation?”

Should I say that I am a student?

“Farmer,” I heard myself say.

This conversation cannot have lasted more than a few seconds. It had seemed like an eternity to me.

The baton moved to the left. I took half a step forward. I wanted to see first where they are sending my father. If he went to the right, I would go after him.

The baton once again pointed to the left for him too. A weight is lifted from my heart. (29)

Although the narrator did not know it at the time, he and his father have escaped death in the crematory by having been chosen for the left side. On his way to prison, he sees flames coming out of a ditch as a truck filled with dead children arrives and dumps its cargo into the fire. It is a scene from the worst of nightmares.

Witnessing such an unbelievable atrocity, the narrator has to pinch his face, but the worst is yet to come. Eventually they are transferred to the main camp at Auschwitz, where they are given prison garb and tattooed; the narrator becomes A-7713. They stay at Auschwitz for three weeks until the iron gates at their new camp, Buna, close behind them.

In Buna, which is described as being “empty and dead” (45), the narrator and his father, despite their attempt to look out for each other, begin experiencing a familial dissolution on account of the horrors of Nazi cruelties. When their guard beats the father, the son gets angry with his father for not being able to avoid the guard’s cruelty: such is the absurdity of concentration camp life.

The life of the father and son, like that of the other Jews, consists mainly of hard work and very short rations. Under these harsh conditions their bodies begin to diminish, especially the father’s. One day a guard takes the father’s “number,” and he is told to stay behind in camp instead of going to the work yard. Afraid that this action means he has been selected for death, the father gives the son his inheritance—a knife and spoon. But when the son returns from work, a day he spends in great anxiety, the father is
found alive; he has avoided selection for death by somehow proving he can still be useful. Others are not so lucky, however.

The winter of 1945 comes, and with the Soviet Army nearing the camp, Buna is evacuated. The father and son, along with the other Jews in the camp, are marched out of the gates into the icy wind. The SS march them relentlessly. On this march, the narrator discovers the limits of human endurance. When a heavy snow falls, many Jews succumb to exhaustion and lie down to freeze to death. There is no one to say prayers for them—even "sons abandoned their fathers' remains without a tear" (87).

Living without food—only snow brings them nourishment—these poor creatures are eventually forced into cattle cars, an evacuation train to Buchenwald. The narrator states that although 100 Jews are forced into the railroad car, only a dozen eventually get off. Even Eliezer's father barely manages to escape certain death when two gravediggers mistake him for a corpse. At Buchenwald his father's health further deteriorates to the point that fellow inmates beat him because he is too weak to go outside to relieve himself. Eliezer gets advice from the head of his block concerning his father: "Don't forget that you're in a concentration camp. Here, every man has to fight for himself and not think of anyone else. Even of his father. Here there are no fathers, no brothers, no friends" (105). On 28 January 1945, Eliezer goes to sleep, only to awaken the next day to discover that his father has been carried away to the crematory. The son does not weep.

Eliezer stays in Buchenwald until the camp is liberated on 11 April 1945. The last anecdote in the book recounts the first time that the narrator sees himself in the mirror after leaving the ghetto: "From the depths of the mirror, a corpse gazed back at me. The look in his eyes, as they stared into mine, has never left me" (109). Notice the narrator's confusion in the personal pronouns his and me. They are the same set of eyes being reflected, but the image of the narrator is someone he cannot recognize as himself. The inhumanity of his treatment by the Nazis has disfigured him beyond human recognition. Whereas Styron's complex novel relies on art to convey its story, Wiesel's novel relies on the story to convey the art.

Winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986 and the 1985 Congressional Gold Medal, Wiesel is today a powerful voice in the fight for human rights. Just as one must never forget about the horror of
the Holocaust, one must never fail to listen to survivors, such as Wiesel, when they warn about contemporary atrocities.

NOTES


