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A Book Report on *Night*

All I knew about *Night*, by Elie Wiesel, was that it was amazing, and stood alone for how great a job it does depicting the struggles of the Holocaust. These were lofty expectations, ones that I personally did not believe would be fulfilled. However, I could not be more mistaken; there was not one moment in this book where I felt as if I could put it down and yet I was so horrified by what I was reading every sense in me told me to stop reading and process what was happening.

Elie Wiesel is first and foremost a teacher, that is how he wishes to be remembered as. He lived from 1928 to 2016, living and, of course, experiencing the Holocaust. After he was freed, he authored more than fifty books, including *Night*. He later became the Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Humanities at Boston University. Along the way he earned many honors most notably, the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986 and later the Medal of Freedom in 1992.

Elie Wiesel opens his novel with a preface, one that sets the tone for what is to come, it begins with him explaining how he cut down his book to make it shorter and not drag things out. However, in the preface of the copy I have he writes in great length about his father passing and how the only thing he was thinking as his own father was beaten to death was for his father to stop crying, “I remained flat on my back, asking God to make my father stop calling my name, to

make him stop crying. So afraid was I to incur the wrath of the SS ... I shall never forgive myself" (Wiesel xi). This preface sets the tone for the book, and once completing the journey Wiesel takes the reader through, the preface takes on a new meaning. It reminds us of how crucial of a moment his father's death was and how much Wiesel is choosing not to say even above the absurdity of the conditions he went through.

What is fascinating about the book is that it is a memoir, simply stories that Wiesel remembered and thought worth passing down. There is no overall purpose to the memoir, no super-objective that is carefully laid out for the reader to follow his story in a chronological fashion. The first English translation of the book was made in 1960, just 16 years after the start of the book.

The story picks up in 1944, in a small Jewish town of Sighet. The story begins in a hopeful denial, that the Germans will not make it to their town in Romania. This illusion was shattered quickly and the Germans made quick work, turn the town into a Ghetto. As the Germans move the Jewish people of Sighet from ghettos to the cattle cars, the tone shifts from disbelief to pure survival.

Upon arriving at Auschwitz, Wiesel immediately faces the unimaginable. Families are separated, and those deemed unfit for labor are sent to their deaths. Wiesel and his father are among the "lucky" ones chosen for work, though the idea of luck quickly turns bitter. Wiesel's writing is brutally honest; one of the most chilling parts of the book for me is when he says, "Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, that turned my life into one long night seven times sealed" (Wiesel 34). The innocence dies that night, along with countless others. This is the last time we hear of his mother and sister, once they were out of sight, he did not have the luxury of mourning.

The memoir continues through Wiesel's struggle to survive in the camps. Starvation, forced labor, and the constant presence of death push him into a numbing state where survival takes precedence over everything. As much as the book is about the Holocaust, it is also about Wiesel's internal battle—the slow erosion of his faith in God, humanity, and even himself. One of the hardest passages for me to read was when Wiesel talks about how, in his suffering, he starts to see his father as a burden, a liability that could endanger his own survival. It was especially hard because his father was the only reason he had hope, and seeing his father give up, made himself even more cold.

During the transport to Buchenwald, is where I found the most retrospective and anger Wiesel has for today's society. German civilians throw bread into the cattle car, and Wiesel describes how the starving prisoners turn into animals, fighting and killing each other for mere scraps. "Men hurled themselves against each other, trampled, tore at each other, bit each other. Wild beasts of prey, with animal hatred in their eyes; an extraordinary vitality had seized them, sharpening their teeth and nails" (Wiesel 101). This is one of the final stages in the descent to inhumanity, and yet he reflects for a solemn time. He reveals a story of a woman throwing coins off a boat that the natives would dive after and collect. After seeing the boys fighting and strangling each other he pleaded with the woman to stop, in which she responded, "Why not? ... I like to give charity" (Wiesel 100). I think he is trying to comment that the Holocaust brought out the worst in people, not necessarily the worst people

What I found most powerful about *Night* is that Wiesel never outright preaches a specific moral. Instead, his restraint lets the events speak for themselves. And by the time Wiesel's father dies in Buchenwald, Wiesel is a hollowed-out version of himself. When the Americans finally liberate the camp, Wiesel looks at himself in a mirror and describes seeing a corpse staring back.

This simple observation ends the memoir on a note of grim finality: “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” (Wiesel 115).

I think the memoir succeeds not because it tells readers what to think, but because it shows them what happens when society descends into apathy, cruelty, and survival at all costs. As much as I wanted to look away while reading *Night*, I couldn’t—and I think that was Wiesel’s intent all along.