

Night and the problem of evil



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In his first and most famous work, *Night*, Elie Wiesel relives his experience in the concentration camps of the Nazi regime during World War II. Wiesel, who was born and raised a devout Jew and excelled at Talmudic and spiritual studies, recounts his loss of freedom, innocence, family, and finally faith. One of the accomplishments of *Night* as a human document is that it not only shows the evils of the oppressors in Auschwitz and Buchenwald, but what evil can do to man. Wiesel saw good men transformed through cruelty into “beasts of prey unleashed” (101). The most important theme in the book is how evil transforms and de-forms man. While the horrors of the Nazi regime are described in *Night*, it is the evil wrought by fellow Jews and victims of the Nazis that takes a central place in this work. From the beginning of his time at Auschwitz, Wiesel experiences the worst abuse from his fellow inmates. At the first barracks Wiesel stayed in, the veteran inmates were waiting to beat the newcomers indiscriminately with sticks (35). This behavior, constituting not only a lack of compassion but outright anger and violence towards fellow humans, appears continually throughout *Night*. After only a few days at the work camp in Buna, Wiesel himself starts to take on this behavior. The dentist who was going to remove Wiesel’s gold crown was arrested for taking some gold for himself, and was going to be hanged. Wiesel not only felt no pity or remorse for the dentist, he was pleased. In the concentration camp, there was not room to worry about other people or abstract notions like compassion; all that existed was your own life and your own empty stomach (51-52). As the tide of war turned against the Nazis, the prisoners in the concentration camps were subjected to more horrors and suffering. As allied troops moved towards Buna, the prisoners were forced to evacuate, but not before cleaning the barracks: “For the

liberating army. Let them know that here lived men and not pigs.” (84) This distinction between men and animals disappears, though, when Wiesel describes the scene in which civilians toss bread crumbs into one of the cattle cars transporting prisoners to the next concentration camp. The prisoners, so starved for food, fall on each other violently and beat each other for little crumbs of sustenance. Wiesel actually witnesses a son strangle his own father for a crust of bread (101). At this point in the book, it is clear that whatever distinguishes us from animals, and men from pigs, has disappeared. The experience in the concentration camps has had the effect of systematically stripping the prisoners of what made them human: their individuality, their compassion, and their remorse. What was left was just the body, more specifically the empty stomach, and the drive to protect the pathetic life left to it. For Wiesel, an important aspect of the evil experienced seemed to be man’s unwillingness to accept it, or even recognize it for what it is. Before the native Jews of Sighet had begun to be persecuted, all foreign born Jews were forced to leave. Moishe the Beadle returned from a near death experience at the hands of the Nazis, and sought to share his knowledge of their evil with his fellow Jews. It was not easy for the people of Sighet, still living their ordinary lives, to conceptualize of the evil Moishe the Beadle proclaimed, and being that he had been poor and of a lower class it was much simpler for him to be dismissed as a madman (6-7). Once the fascist regime had taken over in Transylvania and the Jews had been forced into ghettos there were still those who did not want to believe the worst was possible: “ As far as I’m concerned, this whole business is a big farce...They just want to steal our valuables and jewelry” (21). It was perhaps not until the people of Sighet were herded onto transports that some started to be

overcome with their doubt that everything might not be okay. Mrs. Schächter, an older woman on the transport, started to scream, “ Jews, listen to me, I see a fire! I see flames, huge flames!” At first the people packed into the cattle car felt pity for her, but as her screaming became more manic, so did the other passengers’ need to silence her. In their desire to quiet her, and perhaps to quiet the doubt in themselves, the normally peaceful people who would have been her friends and neighbors from Sighet struck her and tied her up (25-26). Once the cattle car emptied its cargo of people at Birkenau, the reality of the evil that the people of Sighet had not wanted to accept finally set upon them. One inmate yelled at the arriving Jews: “ You should have hanged yourselves rather than come here. Didn’t you know what was in store for you here in Auschwitz? You didn’t know? In 1944?” (30)

Evil often remains a mystery because we are too frightened to explore its real possibilities. The question of why evil and suffering exist is an important one for any person faced with the reality of evil. In *Night*, this is a difficult question for a devout Jew to answer. Being a very religious person, one has to reconcile the reality of what is happening with the type of God one believes in. Some at Auschwitz thought that perhaps they were being punished for sins of the Jewish people. Others thought “ God is testing us. He wants to see whether we are capable of overcoming our base instincts, of killing the Satan within ourselves” (45). Wiesel, on the other hand, was angered by what he saw as God’s silence: “ Why should I sanctify His name? The Almighty, the eternal and terrible Master of the Universe, chose to be silent. What was there to thank Him for?”(33) Wiesel likens himself to the biblical character Job. Job was an innocent and righteous man who still suffered, despite leading a life devoted to God. He challenged the

assumption that suffering was punishment for sins, since he had committed none. Job is able to find peace through the realization that although there may be no explanation for suffering, God is present in Job's suffering just as he is in Job's blessings. Through this reaffirmed faith in God's presence in his life, Job is able to find peace with his pain. For Wiesel, though, even the story of Job does not bring peace. Wiesel found God to be completely absent from Auschwitz. It does not appear to be until after writing *Night* that Wiesel gains some sort of peace with what has happened. Wiesel, as he states in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, has tried to make something out of the life he was lucky enough to keep through the concentration camps. As Wiesel said, "I have tried to keep memory alive... We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim" (118). It seems that for Wiesel, the evil he experienced had at least one positive result: that it might prevent such evil from reoccurring. This idea of suffering as a renewing or teaching experience is common in latter Jewish thought and Christianity. *Night* is a deeply personal look at the suffering Wiesel went through without any filters. Wiesel does not at any point attempt to justify or offer excuses for the evil propagated by the Nazis or by the Jews themselves in the concentration camps. He focuses instead on offering a brutally honest look at what happens to men when they are pushed to their limits and the evil we are capable of. Our humanity is something that we can often take for granted, but in *Night* Wiesel shows how even that can be stripped from us. The book is stylistically simple, short, and easy to read, but the truths found in it are much harder to grasp. As noted earlier, evil is something we are at times hesitant to confront, but the purpose of this work is to force us to do just that. This is why Wiesel does not try to paint himself or anyone else in

the book as more heroic than they were, because only the whole truth is revealing. By sharing the tale of his journey into “ the Kingdom of Night”, in all of its power, Wiesel cautions mankind against letting such a thing happen, and thus we are all able to find some meaning in the tragedy of the Holocaust.