

# Selfishness



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Selfishness - Exclusive regard to one's own interest or happiness; that supreme self-love or self-preference which leads a person to direct his purposes to the advancement of his own interest, power, or happiness, without regarding those of others. Martin Luther King Jr. once said " Every man must decide whether he will walk in the light of creative altruism or in the darkness of destructive selfishness. " This quote is saying that every person must decide whether he is going to help out other people and be seen as a selfless person or become selfish and be seen as a person who only cares about him or herself. During the Holocaust, pretty much all people had to make this decision. The decision of whether to share what you had and increase the chance of you dying but increase the chance for the other person to live. The other choice was to become selfish, hoarding what had and keeping it to yourself. This behavior would slightly increase your own chances of survival. For good or bad, most people chose the decision to look out for themselves. This relates to the books *Night* by Elie Wiesel and *Maus* by Art Spiegelman because the characters of both books have to decide whether they are going to look out for themselves or if they are going to try to help out others. When a human being is faced with a life or death situation, they typically become selfish in order to survive because human instinct kicks in and you only try to keep yourself alive as illustrated in *Maus* and *Night*. Being selfish can take many forms. One form is the unfair trading of food or taking food from people. In many cases in the books *Maus* and *Night*, selfishness involved food because it is so necessary for living that people were willing to do almost anything for it. In the book *Night*, Elie tells about how bad the Holocaust was. Toward the end of the book, Elie writes about how his father had so little energy that he just seemed lifeless. Elie's

described his father crawling on the floor and reaching for his chest. Elie thought he had gotten a blow to his chest, but then his father pulled out a piece of bread. Next his father saw a shadow loom upon him then the shadow threw itself upon him. Elie's father said, " My boy! Don't you recognize me? I'm your father . . . you're hurting me . . . you're killing your father (Wiesel 96)! " During this quote Elie jumped on top of his father and took his bread from him. Seeing that Elie would take bread from his already very weak father shows how far people would go for basic food. People were almost forced to do things like this worse, just to have a fighting chance to survive this horrific situation. Many people also made unfair trades for goods and food which happened to Vladek in the book Maus. Food is also a major obsession for Vladek in the novel Maus. He took advantage of another prisoner who needed food very badly. The shirts that the Nazis gave the prisoners were very thin and lot of the time had lice in them. Vladek knew that a shirt was very important, something that some may not have known. Vladek asked a man who was clearly hungry if he wanted to buy some chocolate. The man looked at him like he was crazy and asked if he looked like a millionaire. Vladek, now knowing he didn't have money to pay, went to the next best thing which was his shirt. Vladek asked the man to trade his shirt for the chocolate. The man replied, " My shirt?! You're crazy — I'd freeze! Um give me your days ration of bread too" (Spiegelman 94). This quote is saying that the man, even though he knew he could freeze by giving up his shirt, gave it up because he lacked food. Vladek now had two shirts when most other people had one or none. In these two examples, both Vladek and Elie show that when they are facing death, they become very selfish and just look out for themselves in order to survive. Elie was being

selfish in this instance because he took advantage of an older and much weaker man than himself, which also happened to be his own father. In the case with Vladek, he knew that someone would be so food deprived that they would do anything for any food, nevertheless chocolate. So both of these men are showing that they are choosing to be selfish in order to have a better chance at surviving themselves. Another example of selfishness is not sharing inside advice that you get. In *Maus* and *Night* this happens to both Vladek and Elie several times. In *Night*, Elie receives some very harsh clues on how to survive the Holocaust and most of them were very bad. Elie was always trying to look out for himself and his father, but he doesn't realize that he will soon have to stop and look out for himself. Elie's father was much older than him and was in much worse shape than Elie. Elie was talking to a man who gave him some very real advice to say the least. The man was telling Elie that not only should he avoid helping out random people, he had to even stop helping his own father. The man said, " Listen to me, boy. Don't forget that you're in a concentration camp. Here every man has to fight for himself and not think of anyone else (Wiesel 105). " Later on the man went on to talk about how Elie should not give his father any of his bread, Elie should be taking his fathers ration. This was a very real but harsh reality for Elie. This quote is saying that Elie must not help out anyone in the camp or he will lower his own chance of survival. Like Elie, Vladek in the book *Maus* also had people telling him secrets to surviving the camps. Vladek got many hints from people of a higher rank. He got some very good information from a polish man that was a guard for the lower class prisoners. The guard was lining all of his prisoners up and asking them questions. He told them to raise their hand if they could speak English. Next he asked them

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to raise their hand if they could speak English and Polish. The ones that could stepped forward and were tested. The Polish guard just so happened to want to learn English and Vladek was the best at it. The guard asked Vladek to teach him English and in exchange he would give him good clothes and good food and the guard also gave Vladek some good hints. The guard told Vladek, " Listen. There are too many prisoners here. The S. S. will line you all up tomorrow. . . . Be sure to stand on the far left (Spiegelman 31). " If it wasn't for this guard Vladek could have died that day. This guard may have saved Vladek's life by telling him that he needed to stand to the far left. The S. S. Soldier's took all of the prisoners from the right and they went straight to the gas chambers. This officer ended up giving Vladek tons of help in his times in the camp. Both of these examples from these books show how getting inside advice can help you survive. These pieces of advice played a huge role in both of the characters' experiences in the camps. In Elie's case he was told that he should only fend for himself and he had to even leave his own father to die. In Vladek's case, it was the guard that helped him throughout most of his camp experience. These show how selfishness kicks in because neither of them told anyone the advice that they were given and they both used the advice to their advantage. In a lot of cases near the end and even after the Holocaust, people were still very selfish in many ways because of their experiences. In Elie's case it happened to be that even at the very end of the Holocaust he still was very selfish. What happened was that Elie's father was on his death bed. He was very old and ill and was going to die very soon. After Elie chose to take his father's food and look out only for himself, he found it hard for it to be a bad thing that his father had passed away. Elie said this, " And, in the depths of my being, in the recesses

of my weakened conscience, could I have searched it, I might perhaps have found something like-free at last (Wiesel 106)! " Elie is saying that he is feeling free because his dad has finally died. Elie's dad to him was kind of like a road block holding him back because Elie had to take care of himself but his dad also needed Elie to take care of him which Elie would not do. When his dad died it took a weight off of his shoulders. Now he only had to worry about himself and not his father as well. On the other hand Vladek was very selfish even way after the Holocaust was over. In Maus, Vladek is selfish about pretty much everything. One day while Vladek, Art, and Françoise were driving back from the store they saw a man walking on the road. As they got closer to the man Françoise started to slow down to car. Vladek screamed asking why he was slowing down. He simply replied that there was a hitch-hiker. Vladek replied very angrily, " A hitch-hiker? And-oyit's a colored guy, a shvartser! Push quick on the gas (Spiegelman 98)! " Later on in the car Vladek also says that the man could have stolen their groceries from the back seat. Vladek is showing that he is still selfish because he didn't even want to give a man a ride a couple blocks down the road on a very hot day. This quote is also saying that Vladek could be racist because he didn't want to give him a ride partly because he was " colored". In both books both of the characters show selfishness throughout. These quotes show that first Elie was selfish near the end of the Holocaust and second that Vladek was still very selfish many years after the Holocaust. It shows this because when Elie's father died it was very close to the end of the camp that they were in, also in Vladek's case this incident with the car happened many years after the Holocaust was over so he obviously is still selfish. Although both of these men were selfish they had great reason to be and it is very understandable

that you would still be selfish after going through something so awful like the Holocaust. When someone is faced with a life or death situation they may become selfish in order to make sure that they are the ones that come out alive; this happens because human instinct kicks in and you only care whether you are getting what you need to survive as you can see in *Maus* and *Night*. You can see this happening in the books many times. Three times this happened in *Night* with Elie where first, when he takes food from his dad. Second, when Elie takes advice from a man to forget about his father and only take care of himself. Lastly, when near the end of the Holocaust Elie is feeling free now that his father is dead. This also happened many times in the novel *Maus* when Vladek trades chocolate which no one needs for a shirt which is very important. Next, when Vladek takes much advice and goods from the Polish guard and shares with no one, and lastly many years after the Holocaust his selfishness is still showing when he hates the fact that Françoise picked up a hitch-hiker. Selfishness plays a huge role in almost everyone's lives today. If there was no selfishness, people would get nowhere in life because they would always be pleasing other people and not helping themselves at all. Everyone has selfishness in them and some people use it for good and others use it for bad. Works Cited Spiegelman, Art. *Maus*. Pantheon Books, New York: 1986. Print. Wiesel, Elie. *Night*. Bantam Books. New York: 1960. Print.