

Levi the chemist and
levi the writer:
survival in auschwitz



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When considering Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*, one is immediately struck by his deadpan tone, emphasis on factual descriptions and blunt presentation of his content. Levi comments on the events he describes and offers his own insight, but never allows his perspective to interfere with his presentation of facts or detract from the objective manner in which he recalls the events of the Holocaust. Given Levi's background as a chemist, the question arises as to how one should differentiate between Levi the author and Levi the scientist, or whether such a distinction is necessary. This essay will consider Levi's identity and outlook, as well as both his motivation behind writing and method of communicating, in an effort to establish to what degree he writes like a chemist.

The first factor that one must consider is Levi's own upbringing and personal context, since it was influential on his outlook on the Holocaust. He was educated at the Liceo Massimo d'Azeglio, a school renowned for its anti-Fascist sentiments, and studied chemistry at the Università degli Studi di Torino, although his classification as a Jew made it hard for him to graduate. From this education, he drew a positivist outlook by which he placed his trust in facts and reality, in contrast to Fascist racial dogma and idealism. Levi himself remarked that 'chemistry and physics . . . were the antidote to Fascism' (*Il sistema periodico*, Ferro), and since he leans on his scientific principles when examining Fascism, it is only natural that his careful, analytical realism should be reflected in his writing.

In addition to this, Levi was born in Turin and lived there both before and after his experience in Auschwitz, since he felt a strong connection with it as a home. This is significant when it is considered that Turin was an industrial, <https://assignbuster.com/levi-the-chemist-and-levi-the-writer-survival-in-auschwitz/>

positivist city that remained notably anti-Fascist and was at odds with Mussolini's idealistic Italy. For example, Antonio Sonnessa (Factory Cells and the Red Aid Movement: Factory and Neighbourhood Forms of Organisation and Resistance to Fascism in Turin, 1922-1926) notes 'The recalcitrant opposition of the city's labor movement and working class to fascism and capitalism between 1920 and 1922' and thereby outlines a city with an ideological foundation that was strongly sceptical of Fascism and modern Italian politics. Whilst Levi should not be considered synonymous with predominant Turinese opinion, it is clear from his writing that he retained this scepticism and rejection of Fascism. In short, before he had any experience in a concentration camp, Levi was provided with the perspective of a secular, positivist chemist by his education, career and home town, and one would expect this perspective to influence his writing regardless of subject matter; he is not merely writing like a chemist, he is writing as a chemist.

Moreover, Levi's style of writing and the reasoning behind it must also be considered; it is not enough to say that he writes like a chemist because he is one, given his careful treatment of the subject matter. While he maintains a matter-of-fact, deadpan register throughout, Levi adopts two manners of writing. The first of these styles is that of factual description that lacks any deliberate emotional resonance with the reader; if one does react to it, it is a personal reaction and nothing more. The other style is focused more on Levi's own thoughts and reactions and therefore offers a more philosophical insight into content that is otherwise totally dry. The difference between these two styles is outlined effectively by two passages in which Levi

describes Auschwitz: in the first ('Auschwitz: un nome privo di dignificato, allora e per noi; ma doveva pur corrispondere a un luogo di questa terra') he captures the sense of the unknown that gripped him and his fellow passengers on the train to the camp, as well as a sense of positivist relief at learning that they were headed to a real destination - he grants the reader a powerful emotional insight into the mind of a Jew travelling towards an uncertain doom. However, the second reference to Auschwitz ('Noi siamo a Monowitz, vicino ad Auschwitz, in Alta Slesia: una regione abitata promiscuamente da tedeschi e polacchi...' and so on) is a stream of information with nothing attached to it that might point the reader towards a specific reaction; Levi details the facts and leaves his reader to treat them as he/she will. Whilst these two approaches to writing are very different, they both resemble what one might expect to see in a lab report - the factual approach parallels to observations of what occurs during an experiment, and the philosophical approach parallels to the explanation and interpretation of data that one would expect a chemist to offer. This style is effective for writing about the Holocaust, since Levi's facts are objective and faithful to the events whilst supplying the reader with an accessible means through which to view them. On the other hand, Levi's personal insights are distinct enough from the bare facts to avoid the universal experience of the Holocaust being clouded by or confused with Levi's experience as an individual, so they provide a compelling and thought-provoking perspective that doesn't attempt to represent the suffering of others in itself.

Consideration of Levi as writing like a chemist takes on another level of significance when one contemplates the nature of Auschwitz and what

concentration camps actually represented. One might consider the Lager as a laboratory examining the behaviour of humanity when pushed beyond the boundaries of humane living conditions. In *I sommersi e i salvati*, most notably the chapter *La zona grigia*, Levi considers how individuals had to compromise their own values in order to survive under the SS' regime, the hierarchy of which permeated the society of the prisoners, especially in the context of how some prisoners were granted special privileges by the guards. As Levi says here, 'Limitiamoci al Lager, che però...può ben servire da "laboratorio": la classe ibrida dei prigionieri-funzionari ne costituisce l'ossatura, ed insieme il lineamento più inquietante.' Having detailed the use of the Lager as a laboratory in which one could observe the reaction of its prisoners to its harsh environment, most notably in the case of those who became part of the system as 'functionary prisoners.' However, he also says that this specific class of prisoners were only the 'ossatura' and that the prisoners' society was 'una struttura interna incredibilmente complicata' - as Levi writes in *Se questo*, 'voremmo far considerare come il Lager sia stato... una gigantesca esperienza biologica e sociale,' and he also expresses shock at the cold, indifferent approach of the guards, showing the sterile, mechanical way that the camp and its authorities operated. Therefore, if one takes the Lager as the framework for a huge social experiment, as Levi did, then in observing and attempting to understand it, one takes on the role of a scientist. Enrico Mattioda (*Al di qua dal bene e del male*) considers the how Levi's perspective as a chemist makes him especially suitable for this observational, analytical role, since 'La chimica ha insegnato a diffidare delle apparenze, a distinguere il simile dal dissimile, ed anche questo si rivela utile in Lager.' Levi is not just a chemist in vocation, education and <https://assignbuster.com/levi-the-chemist-and-levi-the-writer-survival-in-auschwitz/>

style of writing, but also as a writer and prisoner. It therefore follows that in writing an account of his experience as the latter, he must also do so as the former, thereby assuming the role of a scientist considering an experiment.

Levi's scientific style of writing can be attributed not only to the content that he aims to capture with it, but also to his purpose behind writing. Levi's is not only account, but also of hundreds of thousands of people who died in concentration camps before they had a chance to bear witness to their experiences - as Jonathon Drucker (Primo Levi and Humanism After Auschwitz (2009)) puts it, ' Levi's testimony shoulders the heavy responsibility of speaking for victims...who have no voice of their own.' As such, it cannot be a wholly personal or subjective account as with some other testimony (for example, the diary of Anne Frank), since this would fail to do justice to those who did not survive - compelling as one might find it, the experience of Primo Levi does not count as the experience of thousands of other Holocaust victims. Therefore, in writing on behalf of others in a highly observational and analytical manner, Levi provides a convincing representation of what life might have been life for any of the prisoners (overlooking experiences specific to Levi, such as his work as a prisoner-chemist.) What *Se questo* lacks in personal value is made up for by its convincing insight into the mechanisms of Auschwitz as would apply to any of the victims on behalf of whom Levi is testifying.

However, Levi's intention in writing is not just testimonial; *Se questo* certainly bears witness to the tragedy of Holocaust victims, but it also has a confrontational side. In *I sommersi e i salvati*, he wrote with regard to the perpetrators of the Holocaust that ' before, they were oppressors or
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indifferent spectators, now they would be readers: I would corner them, tie them before a mirror.' In this context, one might consider him as writing just as much like a jurist as like a chemist; both roles must present facts in a clear and unbiased way, but unlike the chemist, the jurist does to attain a certain reaction. In the words of Judith Woolf (The Cambridge Companion to Primo Levi, Chapter 3), 'Justice with which Primo Levi was concerned was not the justice of Nuremburg...he wanted to understand his adversaries and to confront them by forcing them to confront themselves.' Levi's dry style displays the Holocaust through its own inhumane nature rather than through subjective embellishment, and therefore forces the reader to react to the events it describes. Whilst *Se questo* does resemble the writing of a chemist to a significant degree, it must be remembered that science does not concern itself with morality, unlike Levi as a writer in sense of some form of justice. Therefore, Levi's manner of being analytical, observational and looking for patterns of understanding has significance beyond Levi's experience as a chemist and the scientific nature of what he captures; it is also the most effective way of confronting the perpetrators.

While the parallel between Ulysses, the wandering hero who goes through great trials before returning home, and Levi might lead one to view Levi as a valorous protagonist as well, there is a crucial difference between them: Dante's Ulysses (with whom Levi concerns himself primarily, as opposed to Homer's) pushes the boundaries of what humanity can achieve, but Levi experiences the boundaries of what humanity can endure. Therefore, Levi is not an explorer, but an observer of what is effectively a destructive experiment on humanity. His role as an author does not correspond fully to

that of a chemist – his own moral perspective and search for ‘ justice’ by forcing the perpetrators of the Holocaust to confront their own misdeeds transcend the confines of a scientific perspective. However, Levi’s education, positivist outlook and careful observational treatment of his content result in a testimonial account that has much in common with the writing of a chemist.