

Trinity Santaolaya

Professor Warner

ENGL112B

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Unit of Study: The Holocaust Taught through Literature

Rationale

As time passes and people become increasingly more disconnected from the atrocities of the Holocaust, or the state-wide systematic murder and torture of six million Jewish people and others who challenged the Nazi ideology during World War II, it is more important than ever to preserve the emotional significance of this tragedy, rather than merely teaching it as a moment in history. Although the Holocaust began at 1941—less than a century from our present moment—the Holocaust survivors that are still alive today are quickly aging, and soon there will be no first-hand, verbal accounts from them. However, literature is an imperative avenue that can retain the emotional pertinence of the Holocaust; the real, written accounts of Holocaust survivors allow for the window of opportunity for students to not only empathize and acknowledge the gravity of the Holocaust’s impact on Jewish people, but to meditate upon the very unsettling truth that such atrocities can and will happen again so long as bigotry and hatred overcomes humanity.

Prior to teaching the central text of this unit, I decided to introduce Holocaust literature by having my class first listen, read, and then analyze song lyrics written by Holocaust survivors. Then, expanding upon this lesson with song lyrics, I decided to incorporate a lesson on Holocaust poetry, predominantly centering on “Refugee Blues” by W. H. Auden and “The

Survivor” by Primo Levi. Poetry is a very powerful artistic form that will quickly expose students to the Holocaust victims’ perspective. It is a good starting point to teach Holocaust poetry because it will make the students contemplate not only the historical events of the Holocaust, but the suffering of its victims.

After the introduction of this unit, I will focus on the central text of the unit. The centerpiece I chose is Elie Wiesel’s *Night*. This memoir follows his experience as a Holocaust survivor in the Auschwitz concentration camp during the Nazi regime. *Night* is a popular literary choice to introduce the Holocaust to students for very good reasons. Perhaps the most important reason is that its poignant, haunting prose is emotionally appealing. It is very easy for anyone, especially young adults, to connect with the memoir and sympathize for the victims of the Holocaust because of the brutality that they were subjected to; this memoir’s powerful diction, which doesn’t shy away from fully expressing Wiesel’s experience, even though its chilling and disturbing, helps readers step inside Wiesel’s narrative. The themes of *Night*, such as Wiesel’s wavering faith for his religion and his guilt over not supporting his ailing father as much as he could have, are also universal and enable the students to connect with the text.

Accompanying this central piece, I chose to assign the reading of the graphic novel *Maus I*, by Maus Art Spiegelman. This novel incorporates both fictional elements and nonfictional elements very effectively to depict the psychological scars of Holocaust survivors, similar to *Night*. It is appealing to young students because of its fictional, artistic (and ominous) depiction of people as different animals, such as mice to represent Jewish people, cats to represent German people, and pigs to represent Polish people. However, its nonfiction aspect is equally compelling because it documents the real narrative of Spiegelman’s father, a Holocaust survivor. The

graphic novel's nonfictional and fictional aspects make it an excellent companion piece to Wiesel's *Night*.

This unit of study will (depending on class schedule) take place within a span of 5-6 weeks. The first week will be dedicated to contextualizing the Holocaust with a concise lecture and a showing of a short film made by the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. The second week introduce Holocaust literature through song lyrics and poetry. The next weeks will be dedicated to the teaching of the central text, *Night*, and its companion text, *Maus I*.

Contextualizing The Holocaust - Week One

Before introducing Holocaust literary works, it is extremely important to contextualize the Holocaust. To do so, I will do the following during the first week:

- 1.) Give a lecture on the Holocaust and the events leading up to it (including the prevalence of antisemitism and the Holocaust's place in World War II).
 - Before this lecture, I will have my students write on an index card what they know about the Holocaust, and what they want to know. I will address this index card at the end of the lecture.
 - During my lecture, I will have the students take notes on their journal, so that their journal can be a reference to them as they do their literary readings.
 - With the assistance of my class, I will map out a timeline of the Holocaust on the whiteboard after my lecture. My students will copy the timeline on their journal.
 - After we map out a timeline, I will ask my students to look at their index card and prompt them to ask me further questions about what they would like to know.

2.) Show them the film [“The Path to Nazi Genocide”](#) uploaded by the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. This film gives insight to Nazi ideology and its effect on the Holocaust.

- I will ask them to write down any impressions they have about the film in their journal.
- After the film we will have a group discussion about the film. I will ask my students about the impressions they wrote down in their journal.

“INTO” Holocaust Literature - Week Two

This week will be split between two focuses: first, Holocaust songs, and second, Holocaust poetry.

1. HOLOCAUST SONGS

- I will print out the English translations of the song lyrics [“By the Ghetto Gate”](#) and [“We Long for a Home”](#) and give the translations alongside its original language to my students. Our class will analyze one song at a time.
 - First, I will give context to the song before reading the lyrics out loud to my students.
 - Then, I will have my students independently read and annotate the song lyrics as they would with a poem.
 - After their independent close reading, I will pass out the following worksheet which they will fill out with their desk partner. I will ask them to only focus on the right column of the worksheet until I give them further instruction:

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>What messages can you interpret from these song lyrics? What diction (word choice) or phrases help create your interpretation? Consider the voice being expressed through these song lyrics and interpret the meaning behind this song.</p> | <p>How does your hearing of the song transform or add to your interpretation of the song lyrics? Are there any sections of the song that stick out to you?</p> |
| | |

- Next, I will play the song out loud. After playing the song, I will ask them to fill out the left side of the column with their partner.
- After they fill out the left side of the column, we will come together as a collective to discuss how the audio transforms or adds to the meaning of the song lyrics.

2. HOLOCAUST POETRY

- I will print out and distribute the poems “Refugee Blues” by W. H. Auden and “The Survivor” by Primo Levi. We will first focus on “Refugee Blues”.
 - I will have them first read the poem independently.

- After they finish reading the poem, I will play a video recording of someone reading the poem. For “Refugee Blues,” I will play the [poem reading](#) courtesy of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.
- We will analyze “Refugee Blues” together as a class using a worksheet I will distribute in my class. The worksheet asks the students to explain the central idea of the poem, infer the author’s purpose, and interpret ways the poem creates meaning.
- After we analyze “Refugee Blues” together, I will distribute “The Survivor” and repeat the process, but the students will fill out the worksheet as a group after jotting down their annotations during their close reading.
- Finally, we will discuss “The Survivor” as I ask each group to present their previous discussions as a class.
- For their homework, I will assign my students to write their own poem or song lyrics to commemorate the Holocaust.

“Through” Holocaust Literature / The Central + Companion Piece - Week 3-6

- First, I will do a brief lecture on what a memoir is, and give some information on the background behind Elie Wiesel to introduce *Night*. I will also give some background information on *Maus I* because my students will be reading both books concurrently.
- Students will do their reading for *Maus I* independently. We will read *Night* together as a class. If possible, students should get color-coded tabs to mark *Maus I* and *Night*. I will

ask my students to trace the themes of identity, family, religion, grief, death and survival throughout their readings of both texts.

- Student activities and assignments are as followed:

- 1.) On their journal, I will have them draw a diagram that they will log in their summary, general thoughts, and key aspects and themes of *Night* that stands out to them after every reading session we complete in class.
- 2.) Additionally, inspired by Dr. Warner's "brown bag" activity, I will have my students write down a symbol, image, description, or quote that stands out to them on an index card, and ask them to elaborate on why this stands out to them. We will discuss their "brown bag" items as a class.
- 3.) I will have my student complete the following writing prompt in-class: Who are you? Write characteristics, values, and key people in your life that help form your identity.
 - Then, I will ask them to write about the characteristics, values, and key people in Weisel's life that formed his identity during the Holocaust. We will discuss this as a class.
- 4.) I will have my students write a short memoir, accompanied by visual imagery. This imagery can be memes, drawings, or pictures found online (as long as they are credited.)
- 5.) After our reading of *Night*, we will trace the events that occur in the memoir together as a class on the whiteboard to contextualize the book.
- 6.) For their homework, they will read *Maus* and complete the following:
 - I will hand them a worksheet that they will fill out every time they finish their assigned reading for the class day. On this worksheet, they are asked to identify a scene, image, or

quote that encompasses the theme of identity, family, religion, grief, death or survival.

They are also asked to write a brief paragraph on how their chosen scene, image, or quote encompasses this theme.

7.) I will have my students compare and contrast *Night* with *Maus I* with the following chart:

8.)

| | <i>Night</i> | <i>Maus I</i> |
|---|--------------|---------------|
| What is the author's purpose? | | |
| How does the format play into the narrative of the literary texts? | | |
| In what ways does one of the six themes we are tracing (identity, family, grief, death, survival, and religion) play into the literary texts? | | |
| What perspective is either literary text in? How does perspective contribute to the story's narrative? | | |

9.) Finally, I will have my students write an essay based on one of the six themes they traced throughout their readings of both texts. The prompt involves them incorporating both *Night* and *Maus I* in their essay, and it also needs to focus on one theme.

“BEYOND” Holocaust Literature / Suggested Readings+Extra Credit Week 6

- Using one of the suggested readings below, students have the choice of doing a book talk for extra credit. This book talk should incorporate creative media of some sort. It can be in the form of a presentation, a pre-recorded video, or even a stage play. However, they must discuss the significance of their chosen YA novel and tie it back to either *Night* or *Maus I*.

SUGGESTED READINGS:

White Rose by Kip Wilson. This book is an in-verse novel that tells the real story of Sophie Scholl, a primary member of the non-violent resistance group against the Nazi regime, which advocated against concentration camps and the Holocaust. Although it is not from the perspective of a Holocaust survivor or victim, it still tells the valuable message of needing to speak up against injustice, as conveyed in the memoir *Night* and *Maus I*.

The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas by John Boyne. This book is also about a German youth who grew up in the Nazi Regime. It is a fictional story that tells of the forbidden friendship between the main character and a Jewish boy who is confined in a concentration camp. Like *Night*, a prominent theme in this book is the struggle of having faith in one's beliefs.

The Book Thief by Markus Zusak. This story centers on a young girl who finds passion for literature/books during the Nazi Regime. Because she is an orphan, she is sent to her foster parents, Hans and Rosa, who also make the risky decision of sheltering a Jewish boy. Once again, this book comes from a different perspective--from a victim of war, but not a victim of the Holocaust. However, this book complements well with *Maus I* and *Night* because it deals with

the character's loss of faith in humanity. Although her disillusionment is made at a slower pace, it is still reflective of the disillusionment found from the Holocaust survivors of *Maus I* and *Night*.

Citations

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