

### **Unit of Study: Studying the Holocaust through Literature**

**Introduction of the Unit** – Focusing on internationally famous tales, diaries, and stories related to the Holocaust and the Second World War, this unit will cover several well known authors, and works that will impact the reader long after they have finished reading the works. One of the appealing factors of Holocaust literature to me is the power within the writing, the depictions of the true elements of humanity, and last but not least, life changing decisions and events. Since first discovering *The Diary of A Young Girl* in the fifth grade, I was constantly looking up and reading as many books as I could find on the topic. Some teachers and peers thought it was a slightly odd interest for a young student such as myself to have at the time, but I disagreed. I was drawn to the deep level of honesty and humanity within the works, even at a young age. I am not condoning in any way that what happened to the victims of the Holocaust was something to be glorified, but instead am wanting to share the appreciation for brutally honest writing, and stories that capture the essence of history, and of the human spirit.

When I first chose the genre of history, I knew I wanted to focus on the Holocaust, as it is a period of history (in addition to the Second World War) that has always intrigued me. It was an easy decision as to which work would be the centerpiece, and the work as a whole seemed to fall into place. By focusing on the 1940s and the Holocaust for my unit of study, I would be ensuring that students had a solid knowledge of both the historical aspects of the Holocaust, but also a deeper level of understanding with the literary supplements. By reading the stories, and being able to think of their own approaches and ideas on the subject, the students would be able to have a concise understanding of life, history, and humanity, at one of its deepest levels.

The canonical work I will focus on for the Unit of Study will be Elie Wisel's *Night*, supplemented by Anne Frank's *The Diary of A Young Girl*. Additionally, *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry and *If I Should Die Before I Wake* by Han Nolan will be used for supplementary literary material. These books are not only favorites of mine, but I feel they provide a well-rounded literary scope of the experience of the Holocaust, and the different perspectives associated with it. *Night* and *Diary* focus on the experiences of Jewish individuals who ultimately experienced the horrors of Auschwitz firsthand, and also Anne Frank, who lived for two years in hiding, before being discovered and deported by the Gestapo. In a different perspective and time, *If I Should Die* tells the story of a modern day Neo-Nazi girl named Hilary, who experiences life as a young Jewish girl in a mysterious time travel event following a horrific accident. *Number the Stars* takes place in Denmark in 1943, and is a story of friendship, survival, and also of the Resistance movement as well. Each of these books has their own story, and students would be able to identify which one they enjoyed the most, and which one they thought had the most meaning to them personally.

## **Introduction to the Unit of Study**

The unit of study would open up with a shorter, but just as well known work by Lois Lowry. *Number the Stars* tells the story of Annemarie Johansen, a young Danish girl who lives with her friend Ellen Rosen, whose family is Jewish. With Nazi presence growing stronger in Copenhagen, Annemarie and her family must come up with a way to keep Ellen, her family, and other Jews safe from being discovered. The story, a quick read for a college student, would be broken up into segments for high school students. At the start of each class meeting, students would briefly discuss their thoughts on the prior readings, before launching into the discussion of the current reading. A similar discussion style would follow for Anne Frank's diary, Nolan's novel and last but not least, the canonical work by Elie Wisel, *Night*.

## **Starting the Holocaust Unit**

- I. Introduce the Holocaust, discuss the historical aspects of the event with students.
  - Possible classroom activities might include: open discussion about WWII, the historical facts leading up to the war, the definition of the Holocaust, and the politics behind the Nazi Party.
  - Have students create artwork or images depicting their feelings of the events, or of the plight of the characters in the stories.
- II. Begin reading *Number the Stars*, follow through with the discussion and or artistic activities. Conclude the novel with a discussion on the experiences of Annemarie and Ellen, and how they differ from those of Elie Wisel and Anne Frank, based on pre-existing knowledge of the novels.

Additionally, students could have the option of interviewing family members and or friends, regardless whether they personally experienced or witnessed the events of the war, or not. The interviewing process would allow the students to obtain a deeper level of understanding regarding the Holocaust and the Second World War, and the effects it had on individuals personally, or through learning of them. For example, one could research and interview a grandparent or great grandparent for information on what it was like to live in the 40's and post-war times. Friends (either the same age as the students, or older) could provide a different perspective, closer in age and or perspective to the students. By interviewing different age groups, students would be able to see the effects of the war and the Holocaust in society

## **Discovering *Night***

*Night* by Elie Wisel is one of my most favourite works. It takes the reader on a deeply emotional literary journey into the ghettos of Poland, and finally to Auschwitz, one of the worst death camps of the Final Solution. Wisel narrates in a uniquely calm and concise way, when I read the work, it was as if he was sitting near me, quietly describing the events of his day-to-day life in Poland. With each chapter, the work becomes more and more intense, and at times students may have to take breaks in the readings. Extra time would be allotted for the planned sections of reading, if needed.

Similar to *Number*, discussions and artistry would be utilized to help students process the reading, and their thoughts as they ventured deeper into Wisel's narrative.

One of the main themes Wisel discusses within his book is the identity of the self, and the eternal question of "who am I?" He questions his belief in God, and quite frequently discusses and expresses his anger at God for letting such terrible things happen to him, his family, and friends. People who he wasn't even related to became close, as in the ghettos and in Auschwitz; one makes connections with whomever they can. One never knows when death will come, hence it is always best to have as many contacts and friends as one can. The message of humility, and acceptance of the self is strong within Wisel's novel, and is a topic that deeply affected me when I read *Night* for the first time. This work will likely affect the students, as well, and the class discussions would allow for students to share their thoughts and feelings on the works.

### **Extending and Concluding the Unit- *Diary of a Young Girl, If I Should Die Before I Wake***

Following the conclusion of *Night*, a new discussion would be launched. This time, the topic would focus on the act of journaling, and its place in our lives. Since *Diary of A Young Girl* is simply that, a diary, students would be asked to share their thoughts regarding journaling, and its importance in our daily lives, especially those of youth and teens. A possible assignment for this section of the unit of study would be for students to create a diary of their own, where they would record their thoughts and feelings while reading Anne Frank's book, while making connections to *Night*, as well.

*Diary of A Young Girl* explores the emotional, psychological, and personal growth of Anne Frank over the two years of her living in hiding with family and acquaintances. As if growing up and experiencing adolescence wasn't already difficult enough, Anne has to endure all of the trials and tribulations in very close quarters. Her diary makes references to disputes with family, her questions regarding sexuality and relationships, and overall, her bright spirit and her longing to be free once again. Every time I read the diary, I have to pause at times and remind myself that it was written by a teenager, and not an adult. Anne's writing speaks volumes, and her ideas and perspectives on life are wise beyond her years.

Students would likely be able to relate to the majority of Anne's writings, and they could discuss (either vocally or in writing) their thoughts of her experiences. They might raise questions on how they would feel if they had to go into hiding, and how their perspectives on life as a whole might change. Anne's writing has a true sense of timelessness, one which has, and will continue to brighten the world for years to come.

Lastly, the work of Han Nolan, *If I Should Die Before I Wake* brings a modern approach and vision to the Holocaust. Written in two voices, the main characters, Hillary, and later Chana, Nolan's novel is one of life, deep emotions, and ultimately, that of survival. The emotional journey readers experience while reading this novel is similar to that of *Night* and *Diary*, in that the work raises questions about perspectives of life.

Nolan's work also portrays the desire to fit in, and to feel a sense of belonging. In the perspectives of both Hillary and Chana, she accomplishes this, in way that will haunt readers in a positive and emotional way.

Overall, each of the works selected for this unit of study all have a unique counterpart to them. *Night* is the most serious of them all, and it has uniquely raw elements of humanity, loss, death, and above all, the desire and will to live. Readers will experience the inquisitiveness and wonder of youth followed by a fast journey into young adulthood with *Number the Stars* and *Diary of A Young Girl*, and last but not least, *If I Should Die Before I Wake* captures the essence of the Holocaust, both in a modern and war-time place. Each of these books works well on their own for teaching about the Holocaust, but when brought together, they provide a powerful, heartfelt and enthralling basis for a journey into the human mind, psyche, and spirit.

### **Works Cited**

**Centerpiece:** Wiesel, Elie. *Night*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2006. Print.

Frank, Anne. *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*. New York: Bantam, 1993. Print.

Lowry, Lois. *Number the Stars*. New York: Yearling Book, 1989. Print.

Nilsen, Alleen P., and Kenneth L. Donelson. "Chapter 7: Books about Courage and Survival." *Literature for Today's Young Adults*. 8th ed. N.p.: n.p., n.d. 228-229. Print.

Nolan, Han. *If I Should Die before I Wake*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1994. Print.

### **Studying the Holocaust through Literature: Unit of Study**

- I. Starting the Holocaust Unit
  - Historical aspects would be discussed with students, as would the politics and social structure of 1940s Europe, specifically Germany and Poland.
  - Students would create artwork and or journals depicting their thoughts and feelings.
- II. Number the Stars, Lois Lowry
  - Focuses mainly on WWII, but also on the Resistance movement. Annemarie has a personal connection to the Resistance following her sister's unexpected passing.
  - Provides a happier ending than that of Wisel or Frank's works.
- III. Night, Elie Wisel
  - Travels from the ghettos of Poland to the horrors of Auschwitz.
  - Narrated in a calm way, but becomes more intense as the work develops.
  - Questions life, religion "Who am I?"
- IV. Diary of a Young Girl, Anne Frank
  - Explores emotional, psychological and personal growth of Anne Frank during her two years in hiding.
  - Powerful, allows the reader to see youth and adolescence from a very different perspective
  - Students could use journaling activities to record their thoughts and feelings while reading the diary.
- V. If I Should Die Before I Wake, Han Nolan
  - Written in two voices, the Neo-Nazi adolescent Hillary, and the teenage Chana in Nazi-occupied Poland.
  - Explores the psychological and emotional journeys made by the two females, shows their perspectives on life, and their views.
  - Easier to relate to due to the modernity of Hillary's environment and setting.

Each of these works have their own personal meaning to them, varies from reader to reader. With *Night* being the most serious and *If I Should Die Before I Wake* being the most modern, the works as a whole blend together in a way that is effective for teaching Holocaust literature.