

LESSON: Exploring Night as Literature

NAME: _____

HANDOUT: Speeches, Part III, Section 2

April 19, 1985

President Ronald Reagan presented Elie Wiesel with the Congressional Gold Medal. In Wiesel's acceptance speech, he criticized Reagan for an upcoming trip to Bitburg, Germany, where the president planned to lay a wreath at a cemetery where SS soldiers were buried.

...Mr. President, speaking of reconciliation, I was very pleased that we met before so a stage of reconciliation has been set in motion between us. But then we were never on two sides; we were on the same side. We were always on the side of justice, always on the side of memory, against the SS, and against what they represent.

It was good talking to you, and I'm grateful to you for the medal. But this medal is not mine alone. It belongs to all those who remember what SS killers have done to their victims. It was given to me by the American people for my writings, teaching, and for my testimony.

When I write, I feel my invisible teachers standing over my shoulders, reading my words and judging their veracity. And while I feel responsible for the living, I feel equally responsible to the dead. Their memory dwells in my memory.

Forty years ago, a young man awoke, and he found himself an orphan in an orphaned world. What have I learned in the last 40 years — small things. I learned the perils of language and those of silence. I learned that in extreme situations when human lives and dignity are at stake, neutrality is a sin. It helps the killers not the victims....

I have learned that the Holocaust was a unique and uniquely Jewish event, albeit with universal implications. Not all victims were Jews, but all Jews were victims. I have learned the danger of indifference, the crime of indifference. For the opposite of love, I have learned, is not hate but indifference. Jews were killed by the enemy but betrayed by their so-called allies who found political reasons to justify their indifference or passivity.

But I've also learned that suffering confers no privileges. It all depends what one does with it. And this is why survivors of whom you spoke, Mr. President, have tried to teach their contemporaries how to build on ruins, how to invent hope in a world that offers none, how to proclaim faith to a generation that has seen it shamed and mutilated. And I believe, we believe, that memory is the answer — perhaps the only answer...

But, Mr. President, I wouldn't be the person I am, and you wouldn't respect me for what I am, if I were not to tell you also of the sadness that is in my heart for what happened during the last week. And I am sure that you, too, are sad for the same reasons. What can I do? I belong to a traumatized generation. And to us, as to you, symbols are important. And furthermore, following our ancient tradition — and we are speaking about Jewish heritage — our tradition commands us, quote: "to speak truth to power."

So may I speak to you, Mr. President, with respect and admiration, of the events that happened. We have met four or five times, and each time I came away enriched, for I know of your commitment to humanity. And, therefore, I am convinced, as you have told us earlier when we spoke that you were not aware of the presence of SS graves in the Bitburg cemetery. Of course, you didn't know. But now we all are aware. May I, Mr. President, if it's possible at all,

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implore you to do something else, to find a way, to find another way, another site. That place, Mr. President, is not your place. Your place is with the victims of the SS....

December 10, 1986

Elie Wiesel gave an acceptance speech after being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

It is with a profound sense of humility that I accept the honor you have chosen to bestow upon me. I know: your choice transcends me. This both frightens and pleases me.

It frightens me because I wonder: do I have the right to represent the multitudes who have perished? Do I have the right to accept this great honor on their behalf? ... I do not. That would be presumptuous. No one may speak for the dead, no one may interpret their mutilated dreams and visions.

It pleases me because I may say that this honor belongs to all the survivors and their children, and through us, to the Jewish people with whose destiny I have always identified.

I remember: it happened yesterday or eternities ago. A young Jewish boy discovered the kingdom of night. I remember his bewilderment, I remember his anguish. It all happened so fast. The ghetto. The deportation. The sealed cattle car. The fiery altar upon which the history of our people and the future of mankind were meant to be sacrificed. I remember: he asked his father: "Can this be true?" This is the twentieth century, not the Middle Ages. Who would allow such crimes to be committed? How could the world remain silent? And now the boy is turning to me: "Tell me," he asks. "What have you done with my future? What have you done with your life?" And I tell him that I have tried. That I have tried to keep memory alive, that I have tried to fight those who would forget. Because if we forget, we are guilty, we are accomplices.

And then I explained to him how naive we were, that the world did know and remain silent. And that is why I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men or women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must – at that moment – become the center of the universe....

There is so much injustice and suffering crying out for our attention: victims of hunger, of racism, and political persecution, writers and poets, prisoners in so many lands governed by the Left and by the Right. Human rights are being violated on every continent. More people are oppressed than free...

As long as one dissident is in prison, our freedom will not be true. As long as one child is hungry, our lives will be filled with anguish and shame. What all these victims need above all is to know that they are not alone; that we are

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not forgetting them, that when their voices are stifled we shall lend them ours, that while their freedom depends on ours, the quality of our freedom depends on theirs...

April 22, 1993

Elie Wiesel gave remarks at the dedication of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. He had served as the chairman of a presidential commission (created by President Jimmy Carter) which first proposed the creation of a national museum.

...What has been my vision? When President Carter entrusted me with this project in 1978, I was asked about that vision, and I wrote then one sentence. And now my words are here engraved in stone at the entrance to this edifice. And those words are 'For the dead and the living, we must bear witness.' For not only are we responsible for the memories of the dead, we are also responsible for what we are doing with those memories.

Now, a museum is a place, I believe, that should bring people together, a place that should not set people apart. People who come from different horizons, who belong to different spheres, who speak different languages—they should feel united in memory. And, if possible at all, with some measure of grace, we should, in a way, be capable of reconciling ourselves with the dead. To bring the living and the dead together in a spirit of reconciliation is part of that vision.

Now, may I tell you a story? Fifty years ago, somewhere in the Carpathian Mountains, a young Jewish woman read in a Hungarian newspaper a brief account about the Warsaw ghetto uprising. Astonished, dismayed, she wondered aloud, 'Why,' she said, 'are our Jewish brothers doing that? Why are they fighting? Couldn't they wait quietly'—the word was quietly—until the end of the war?' Treblinka, Ponar, Bełżec, Chełmno, Birkenau. She had never heard of these places. One year later, together with her entire family, she was already in a cattle car traveling to the black hole in time, the black hole in history, named Auschwitz...

Inside the kingdom of night we who were there tried to understand, and we could not. We found ourselves in an unfamiliar world, a creation parallel to God's, with its own hierarchy, with its own hangmen, its own laws and customs. There were only two categories—those who were there to kill and those who were there to be killed...

Oh, I don't believe there are answers. There are no answers. And this museum is not an answer; it is a question mark. If there is a response, it is a response in responsibility.

We also believe in the absolute necessity to communicate a tale. We know we cannot, we never will explain. My good friends, it is not because I cannot explain that you won't understand, it is because you won't understand that I cannot explain. How can one understand that human beings could choose such inhumanity? How can one understand that in spite of everything there was goodness in those times, in individuals?

There were good people even in occupied countries, and there was kindness and tenderness and love inside the camps among the victims.

What have we learned? We have learned some lessons, minor lessons, perhaps, that we are all responsible, and indifference is a sin and a punishment. And we have learned that when people suffer we cannot remain indifferent.

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And, Mr. President, I cannot not tell you something. I have been in the former Yugoslavia last fall. I cannot sleep since for what I have seen. As a Jew I am saying that we must do something to stop the bloodshed in that country! People fight each other and children die. Why? Something, anything must be done.

This is a lesson. There are many other lessons. You will come, you will learn. We shall learn together.

And in closing, Mr. President and distinguished guests, just one more remark. The woman in the Carpathian Mountain of whom I spoke to you, that woman disappeared. She was my mother.