

# **The Accident Study Guide**

## **The Accident by Elie Wiesel**

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# Plot Summary

*The Accident* is the story of a holocaust survivor struggling to adjust to life after World War II. The main character is a journalist whose own experiences during the holocaust have left him, like many others, with a strong sense of despair and self-loathing such that he finds it impossible to find any satisfaction in life. Despite the efforts of his girlfriend and others, he finds himself withdrawing from life. The title of the novel refers to an accident that occurs when he is hit by a cab, while on his way to the theatre. This accident sets off a series of memories that take the reader through the protagonist's psychological and emotional struggles as he grapples with his urge to end his life while simultaneously recovering from a near-death experience. The original French title of the book was *Le Jour* (Day), and it follows the author's two previous works: *Dawn* and *Night*.

Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel wrote the novel, which was published the novel in 1961. The main character, who is without a name throughout the bulk of the novel, is a journalist living in New York City. *The Accident* tells the tale of how the protagonist finds himself in the hospital after being hit by a cab while walking to the theatre one night with his girlfriend, Kathleen. He is badly injured and spends the next several weeks recovering in the hospital.

From the protagonist's hospital bed, he remembers his first encounter with Kathleen, a beautiful dark-haired woman whom he first met while living in Paris, years earlier. Kathleen speaks French with a strong American accent; she is not a holocaust survivor. Still, she is struggling with many of the same issues the main character struggles with.

Born in America, Kathleen escaped the holocaust, whereas our protagonist has lived through it. Still, the guilt the protagonist feels at being left alive while so many perished is somehow akin to the guilt Kathleen feels at having been born in a place where she managed to escape it altogether. History has left them both bereft of any sense of normalcy. His own first-hand experiences with fear, persecution, torture, death and humiliation have left the protagonist unable to take at face value the more humane and beautiful aspects of humanity, so maimed is he emotionally and psychologically by the brutality of the holocaust. It is not only his suffering that has left him bereft. He is struggling to come to terms with his own actions in the face of such brutality.

As for Kathleen, she is acutely aware of the suffering of millions just like the protagonist, suffering that she escaped not because of who she is, but simply because of where she was born. This causes her to experience a level of guilt not unlike the guilt her boyfriend experiences.

The main character's guilt, both at surviving the holocaust and at his own reaction to it, causes him to feel a sense of despair coupled with such intense self-loathing that he finds it difficult to embrace life. In the course of the novel, it comes out that the protagonist is actually aware of the presence of the cab that is careening towards him on the night of the accident. In fact, he is not only aware of it. He allows it to hit him.



The reason for the protagonist's seemingly incomprehensible willingness to welcome his own death is brought out in the preface to the novel. After the holocaust, Wiesel tells us, many of the Jewish children in Poland were unable to embrace life. "They had known how to fight hunger, conquer fear, and outmaneuver the myriad perils that had plagued them *during* the reign of Night. But once the world had more or less returned to 'normal,' they gave up." The painful awareness of the extent to which the horrors of the holocaust had depleted them, coupled with the feeling that they had been both vanquished and stigmatized, left them feeling so completely alone that they no longer had a reason to live. Such appears to be the fate of the protagonist in the novel.

As the protagonist heals from his injuries, while in the hospital, he revisits his past as a holocaust survivor. He struggles with feelings of guilt and anguish over the death of his grandmother, sister and parents. He recalls how he was abandoned on a train platform while he watched his family being hauled away. He is acutely aware of the guilt he feels as a result of the fact that he has survived while countless others perished. He is also horrified and shamed by the behavior he resorted to when the brutality he was subjected to brought him to the point where he was willing to sacrifice others to ensure his own survival.

In the end, the protagonist comes to realize, with the help of an artist friend, that he has failed the very people he loved most by living in the past, rather than embracing his own future. In a symbolic gesture of great emotional impact, he watches as his dearest friend, also a survivor, takes the portrait he has painted of our protagonist and burn it. In that moment, our protagonist realizes that the empty soul, represented by the portrait, is being murdered right before his eyes - not to bring death, but to release him from the guilt and shame that has kept him from embracing life.

The pile of ashes left by the burned effigy of the protagonist will now free him to become whole again. He no longer has to kill himself. He has already done it. Now he can release his own ashes into the cold night air where they will mingle with his grandmother's, and perhaps this will provide the release that will finally allow him to live again.



# Section 1

## Section 1 Summary

*The Accident* is the story of a holocaust survivor struggling to adjust to life after World War II. The main character is a journalist whose own experiences during the holocaust have left him, like many others, with a strong sense of despair and self-loathing such that he finds it impossible to find any satisfaction in life. Despite the efforts of his girlfriend and others, he finds himself withdrawing from life. The title of the novel refers to an accident that occurs when he is hit by a cab, while on his way to the theatre. This accident sets off a series of memories that take the reader through the protagonist's psychological and emotional struggles as he grapples with his urge to end his life while simultaneously recovering from a near-death experience. The original French title of the book was *Le Jour* (Day), and it follows the author's two previous works: *Dawn* and *Night*.

In the first section of the novel, the protagonist is in New York City with his girlfriend Kathleen. It is hot and balmy. He notices the passersby and remarks to himself how haggard everybody looks. Kathleen tries to convince him to eat something after he admits to having eaten nothing all day. "You're slowly killing yourself," she says to him.

As Kathleen and her boyfriend attempt to eat a hamburger, he finds himself disgusted by the smell of the meat and recalls a time, much earlier: He is in a concentration camp. He is starving. Before him, a man is eating a large chunk of raw meat. The man does not look up to see the young boy in front of him. Some time later, the protagonist recalls, the same man is pleading for his life with the people who share his barracks. The man tries to justify his actions, the eating of human flesh, by saying that the person he ate was already dead. His pleas for mercy go unheard. Shortly thereafter, the young boy finds the same man hanging from the rafters of the barracks.

Leaving the meal uneaten, the protagonist and Kathleen discuss where they should go next. He wants to see a mystery. Something, he says, without philosophy or metaphysics. Kathleen is determined to see *The Brothers Karamazov*. He agrees, solely to satisfy her. On their way to the theatre, the accident occurs.

While the protagonist is standing at an intersection, a cab plows into him and drags him several feet. He is badly injured. He is taken to a local hospital but is turned away. The hospital staff tells him they have no room, but he believes he is too far gone to save. Another hospital takes him in. The reader is introduced to Dr. Paul Russel, who will become a pivotal character in the story. Once the protagonist is admitted, he listens as the doctor relates to Kathleen the extent of the damage. He realizes that all the bones along one side of his body are broken, and he has a concussion as well as internal bleeding. Kathleen asks the doctor what she can do. The doctor tells her to pray for him.



Three days of consulting and waiting take place while the hospital staff tries to decide how to proceed. Finally, they agree to attempt surgery, in spite of what appear to be overwhelming odds against success. On the fifth day of the protagonist's stay at the hospital, he regains consciousness. The doctor tells him that the greatest enemy is infection, and he must do everything he can to fight it. Dr. Russel also tells him he should thank God that he is alive. Our protagonist does not thank God.

## Section 1 Analysis

The author's description of the people on the street is bleak. He describes the passersby as being clumsy and haggard, as if they are all trying to escape their own bodies out of disgust at what they've become. The reader can only surmise that the impression these strangers create has less to do with them than with the protagonist's sense of self-loathing. He is projecting his own weary, disillusioned sense of despair onto everybody he sees. When Kathleen tries to get him to eat and says to him that she thinks he is slowly killing himself, he does not argue. In fact, he validates that idea by his own unspoken thoughts. Each time they experience a halt in their movement toward the theater he says that, in hindsight, perhaps he was simply waiting for the accident. This early admission tells the reader two important things: 1) the accident is about to happen, and 2) when it does, our protagonist will welcome it.

When the accident finally does occur and the protagonist finds himself lying on the ground, he is reminded of a poem by Dylan Thomas. He repeats a portion of it to himself: "rage, rage, against the dying of the light." He does not rage. He cannot. Here, again, the reader sees his inability to fight for his own life. When the first hospital he is taken to refuses to admit him, he does not believe their stated reason, that they have no empty beds. He believes, instead, that he *cannot* be saved.

When the protagonist hears Dr. Russel relating his injuries to Kathleen, he hears the doctor telling her to pray for his recovery. Then the doctor asks Kathleen if she loves the injured man, and she says she does. There is hope then, the doctor tells her, for sometimes love is stronger than prayer. This is an important insight and foreshadows later events in the novel, as it is Kathleen's love for the protagonist that causes her the kind of suffering she has up to now avoided.

Five days later, the protagonist awakens. When the doctor tells him they must work to fight off infection, the patient does not see this battle as one between microbes and bacteria. Rather he sees it as a metaphor for his own battle with self-loathing. "You see, Doctor," he tells the young surgeon, "what people say is true: man carries his fiercest enemy within himself." Once again we are reminded that the protagonist cannot escape the concentration camp, not because he is still in it, but because it is still in him.



## Section 2

### Section 2 Summary

This section begins on a cold and windy Paris night when the protagonist is with his friend, Shimon Yanai. Shimon is on his way to meet a woman named Halina. Shimon convinces the protagonist to accompany him, and the two of them find Halina outside a movie theater. Anxious to escape conversation, the protagonist makes an excuse to leave. Halina stops him just as she notices another woman, Kathleen, with whom Shimon is already acquainted. Kathleen is on a date, it seems, but Halina calls Kathleen over and introduces her to the protagonist. There is an instant recognition between them. Though they have never met before, the protagonist tells Halina that he and Kathleen already know each other. Moments later, the protagonist and Kathleen are walking along the Seine together while Kathleen's original date is left standing at the box office, having been quickly and casually dismissed.

The two of them walk for some time without talking. When Kathleen attempts to start a conversation, the protagonist stops her. He is thinking about death. His mind wanders to a conversation with his grandmother when he is a young boy. He is troubled by the concept of death, and he asks his grandmother what keeps people warm when they die and are buried in the grave. What keeps them warm in the grave, she tells him, is the presence of God, himself. When the young boy asks when God dies, his grandmother tells him that God does not die. God is immortal. The boy is horrified at the thought of God being buried alive. Years later, he realizes that his grandmother's fate was not to be warmed by God in a grave. Rather, her fate was to be burned to ashes and carried by the wind. He vows that each time he feels the cold he will remember his grandmother's ashes, swept up by the air, swirling in the cold, dark wind. His silent reverie is broken when Kathleen tells him she is getting cold. She invites him up to her apartment, and he follows her.

### Section 2 Analysis

The meeting with Kathleen, prompted by Shimon and Halina, is deceptively casual. It just happens to occur because Kathleen just happens to be on a date at the same theater Shimon and Halina are planning to attend. Despite the seemingly casualness of their first encounter, the meeting between the protagonist and Kathleen is fraught with meaning. First, the reader discovers that Kathleen has a strong American accent. This tells us that she is not a survivor, like the protagonist and his friends. Yet, there is something in her that the protagonist recognizes, as evidenced by his statement, "But we already know each other."

What the protagonist appears to be saying is that he recognizes in her a pattern of sorts. While the protagonist feels a strong sense of guilt and even remorse for having survived the holocaust that so many perished from, Kathleen has avoided it altogether.



Her heritage as a Jew, unspoken but inferred, leaves her with a similar sense of guilt and remorse. How and why did she escape this awful fate? Can it be fair or even appropriate for her to have avoided the persecution of the Nazis when the Jewish blood coursing through her veins would have condemned her, as it condemned so many others, had she simply been born somewhere else?





## Section 3

### Section 3 Summary

When the protagonist awakens after his surgery, he finds himself attached to several needles that are injecting a variety of chemicals into his bloodstream. He feels like fire is running through his veins and is aware of another presence in the room. It is a nurse. He tells her he is thirsty and wants to drink, but she tells him he cannot because it will make him vomit. Shortly thereafter, the doctor enters the room and tells him that an intense fever, due to infection, is causing this insatiable thirst. This causes him to think once more of his grandmother. He sees her in the concentration camp, crammed into a too-tight space with too many other bodies. She is also crying out for water, but nobody is there to quench her thirst. He suddenly feels a strong desire to speak so that he can tell the doctor the story of his grandmother, of her life and of her death.

Then the protagonist recalls stealing some money to give to a poor orphan boy. When he is confronted by his father, he finds himself unable to explain that he feels guilt because his own parents are alive. He says nothing, and his father hits him. Then he runs to his grandmother and tells her everything. She does not scold him. She holds him and sobs. He remembers her hot tears running down his arms just as the doctor tells him that "she" is waiting outside. Trapped between the past and the present, he believes his grandmother is waiting outside, and he tells the doctor not to let her in. Only when the doctor mentions Kathleen by name does the protagonist realize that it is not his grandmother, but his girlfriend, who is waiting outside to see him. He asks the doctor to show her in, and they speak for just a moment. Then, she leaves.

The nurse gives the patient two injections, one to fight the infection and one to make him sleep. He tells the nurse that he wants an injection to take away his thirst, but she promises that he will sleep and not be thirsty. He tells her that he will dream of thirst. No, she tells him. She will give him a shot against his dreams.

### Section 3 Analysis

In a semi-conscious state, the protagonist moves in and out of time. This allows the reader to gain insight into the personality of the protagonist. We are able to see that his guilt at good fortune began when he was just a boy. His memory of stealing money to help a schoolmate who had lost his parents shows us both his sense of justice and his sense of compassion. He wants to help the orphan boy, but at the risk of angering his father, he refuses to confess his reasons for it. He knows, intuitively, that it would be wrong to tell his father that he feels guilty for that fact that his father is still alive. Instead, he allows his father to punish him for stealing the money. Then, he turns to the one person he can safely confess to, his grandmother.



The protagonist's ties to his grandmother are incredibly strong, so strong that he is haunted by her even after her death. When he hears the doctor telling him that "she" is waiting outside, he is still floating in and out of time and believes that the doctor is referring to his grandmother. He is frightened and begs the doctor not to let her in. It is not that he does not wish to remember her. He fears that if he sees her, she will not be as he now remembers her, and the pain of that would simply be too great for him to bear.



## Section 4

### Section 4 Summary

The protagonist remembers his first evening with Kathleen. They are seated in her home in Paris. There are two cups on the table before them, but neither of them drinks. She asks him to tell her about himself. She says she wants to know him. He tells her he doesn't want to talk about himself, and if he did she would only hate him. This triggers a memory in him of a voyage he took to South America after the war.

The protagonist is standing on the deck of a ship alone, one night, staring at the sea. He wants to jump in and drown, but he is interrupted by a stranger. The stranger stands next to him in the dark and starts a conversation. Despite the protagonist's ill humor and his obvious desire to be alone, the stranger stays with him. The stranger relates an experience from years earlier when he found himself staring at the sea. He recalls how the sea called to him to end it all by jumping in. Then he tells the protagonist that one should not look at the sea for too long, especially at night, when one is alone.

Eventually, the protagonist comes to the realization that it is safe to speak to the stranger. As he puts it, "To talk to a stranger is like talking to stars: it doesn't commit you." Then he begins to tell the stranger the story of his life. He talks for hours, uninterrupted. Despite what must have seemed like incoherent ramblings, the stranger never stops the protagonist or asks for clarification. He just lets him talk. The protagonist tells the stranger everything about his childhood, his grandmother, his teacher and his dreams. He tells the stranger that he considers himself nothing more than "a messenger of the dead among the living." He tells the stranger all the terrible things he's done. After the protagonist finishes, the stranger tells him something that surprises him. He tells the protagonist, "You must know this. I think I am going to hate you."

The protagonist is overcome with the emotion that stems from hearing the truth, however harsh. He wants to shake the stranger's hand in honor of his courage in being able to say what had to be said. Instead, he watches, silently, as the stranger moves on. They do not see each other again.

After remembering this, the protagonist's first encounter with the sea, the protagonist returns to the present and hears Kathleen asking him once again to tell her about himself. When he hesitates, Kathleen tells him what his friend Shimon has told her about him. She tells him Shimon thinks he's a saint because he's suffered so much. This makes the protagonist laugh, almost uncontrollably. He thinks of how absurd it is to think suffering makes one a saint. Saints are the ones who died, he says. "Suffering brings out the most cowardly in man. There is a phase of suffering you reach beyond which you become a brute: beyond it you will sell your soul - and worse, the souls of your friends - for a piece of bread, for some warmth, for a moment of oblivion, of sleep. Saints are those who die before the end of the story. The others, those who live out their



destiny, no longer dare look themselves in the mirror, afraid they may see their inner image: a monster laughing at unhappy women and at saints who are dead . . . ."

The protagonist tells Kathleen everything, and she hangs on every word. It is as if, he thinks, she wants to punish herself because she did not suffer enough. Each time he stops, she encourages him to continue. As he does, he finds himself wanting to take all the pain and the lies and betrayals he has committed and "graft" them onto her so that he can release them, once and for all. When that isn't enough to prove to Kathleen that he is not a saint, he tells her that saints are like the dead. They do not feel desire. Then he takes her, brutally. He does not kiss her. He simply takes her as if he's trying to cause her pain. She submits, willingly, even as she bites her lip to prevent herself from crying out.

## Section 4 Analysis

This section demonstrates more clearly than any other how the protagonist is tormented by his own behavior. The reader is not privy to the specifics of the protagonist's past - what he did, to whom, and when. Still, it becomes clear during his conversations with the stranger and with Kathleen that the suffering he endured has led him to commit unspeakable acts for which he cannot forgive himself. When the stranger on the ship tells him, "I think I'm going to hate you," we believe him. We believe him because we know that he is privy to the actions of which the protagonist is so ashamed.

Ironically, this acknowledgement of truth saves the protagonist's life. While the rest of the world wants to see him as a saint or a victim, he sees himself as diabolical. Having just one person to whom he is able to show his true self somehow validates his existence in a way nothing else can. He wants and needs to be hated in order to reconcile his own hateful past. The stranger gives that to him. In doing so, the protagonist loses the urge to end his life - at least for that moment.

Kathleen, on the other hand, sees the protagonist as a saint, and he cannot allow that to continue. At the same time, she feels as if she hasn't suffered enough. She asks the protagonist to share his stories of shame and suffering with her, as if by doing so she might make up for the suffering she avoided in the past and somehow redeem herself. When she realizes the protagonist feels sexual desire for her, she welcomes his brute attentions because it allows her to experience physical pain. Just as he needs to be seen as a brute, Kathleen she needs to be brutalized. He takes her, forcefully and without tenderness. Had he been tender in his affections, their union would have served no purpose.



## Section 5

### Section 5 Summary

Section 5 is one of the longest sections in the novel, and it covers several conversations that take place in the hospital where the protagonist is recovering. It is now a week since the accident. The protagonist awakens to the cheery voice of his nurse telling him he is allowed to have visitors. He is less than enthusiastic at the news. She insists on shaving him to make him look better. He says he prefers to look ill. The nurse wins out and shaves him. Then, she hands him a mirror so he can admire himself. He threatens to break it. Shortly after the nurse leaves, the doctor enters his room. He tells his patient that the pain will last a few more days and asks him if he is afraid of suffering. The protagonist tells his doctor that he's not afraid of suffering. In fact, he says, he is not afraid of anything.

The doctor and the protagonist spend a few moments admiring the view from the hospital room. The patient remarks on the calm beauty of the river. The doctor corrects him. It is not calm, not really, the doctor says. It only appears calm on the surface, like the patient. This causes the patient to wonder what the doctor knows. He begins to fear he has somehow given himself away. Then the doctor tells him Kathleen is coming and remarks on how extraordinary she is and how much she loves the patient. "But do you love her?" the doctor asks. "Of course," the protagonist replies.

Just before Kathleen arrives, three of the protagonist's colleagues come to visit. They tease him about his attractive nurse and discuss the fact that he will likely make a great deal of money from the lawsuit that will be filed as a result of the accident. The protagonist plays along with the idea of feeling lucky for being so rich, but he doesn't feel lucky. He hurts all over. Soon the three depart, and Kathleen arrives.

Kathleen is tired and haggard but falsely cheerful. She won't stop talking. She tries to tell the protagonist that she will win the fight against his despair. She will win because she's a winner and not used to losing. She is working to hold back tears. He knows that she will not win because she has already lost. She has tried to change him, but instead he has transformed her. They have already spent a year together, but in spite of her heroic efforts, she is still filled with suffering. Now she sits in his hospital room trying not to cry, and he thinks to himself that she is the one who has been transformed, even as she had attempted to transform him. She tells him she has found a lawyer to sue the cab company. She tells him how rich he will be.

After Kathleen leaves, the lawyer she hired for him arrives. His name is Mark Brown. He questions the protagonist regarding the accident. He asks if his client saw the cab approaching on the night of the accident. His client says he didn't, but he hesitates for a moment before giving his answer. The protagonist wants to make sure the driver doesn't have to suffer for the accident. Mark Brown explains that it will be the cab company, not the driver, who will pay the price.



After the lawyer leaves, Dr. Russel arrives. He has made it a habit to visit with the protagonist each morning. This morning, he is unusually exuberant. He confides in his patient, telling him how he has saved the life of a young boy. Even as he is uplifted by his success, he despairs that his triumphs are only temporary. Death, however, he tells his patient, is permanent. He goes on to say that the difference between them is that he (the doctor) sees death as the *only* enemy. He does not concern himself with how men get on, only that they *live*. He reminds his patient that he has held the patient's life in his own hands. Then he asks the patient why he does not care about life.

The protagonist is suddenly gripped with fear. Has he said something in his sleep to give himself away? What does the doctor know? The doctor assures him that is not the case. The doctor says that he has only two things to work with: his skill and his patient's will. He tells the protagonist that during the operation, he received no help at all from his patient. He wants to know why. He demands to know why. The longer his patient refuses to answer, the angrier the doctor gets.

Finally, the patient tells him a story. When he is twelve years old, after having his tonsils removed, he wakes up and laughs. When those around him are surprised by this and ask why he is laughing, he tells them it is because he saw God. This time, he tells the doctor, *this* time he did not see God.

The doctor is very frustrated. He does not understand. The protagonist has the urge to explain that while the doctor is bound to life, he is bound to death. He wants to tell him about Schmuel, the slaughterer, and what happened that night, years ago.

The protagonist wants to say to Dr. Paul Russel, "You want to know who I am, truly? I don't know myself. Sometimes I am Schmuel, the slaughterer. Look at me carefully. No, not at my face. At my hands." He doesn't say it. The doctor doesn't understand. He waits, patiently, for something more.

The patient remembers his boyhood friend, Moishe. Moishe wants to become a rabbi. In the concentration camp, he sees a man trade his food for a prayer book. After the holocaust, Moishe gives up religion and becomes a smuggler. The protagonist thinks that all survivors are like Moishe. Survivors look like the others, but they are not. They are acting. They are pretending. To keep the doctor from having to face what he could not face, the patient keeps on pretending. He does not talk about Schmuel, the slaughterer, or Moishe, the smuggler, he talks about love and life and passion. He tries his best to convince his doctor that he really does want to live. When he realizes his lies are not convincing, he uses the one argument he knows the doctor will understand: Kathleen. He tells the doctor that he loves Kathleen. How could he not want to live?

The doctor is satisfied. He is relieved. He made a mistake, he says. He's glad he was wrong. The protagonist is pleased. He has learned to lie very well. He remembers how he told the same lie to Kathleen, years before, though she had been a harder target. He remembers when they parted. After that she was away from him for five years. She went to Boston and married a rich man. They tortured each other. Five years later, she returned to tell the protagonist how unhappy she was.



When Kathleen returns, she tells him of her marriage to this much older man whom she does not love. She tells him that she married this man precisely *because* she did not love him. She *wanted* to suffer, she tells him. Now she wants to tell the protagonist everything: how much and how long she has suffered. She wants him to help her. He says he will, but even as he says it, he feels that he should not help her. To help a woman like Kathleen, he thinks, is to insult her.

## Section 5 Analysis

In this section, the protagonist finds himself in opposition to almost everybody he sees. It starts with the nurse, who tries to shave him and clean him up for his visitors. She does not understand that he has no desire to look well. He isn't well. It's just one more lie to him. The friends who visit are cheery and bright. They tell him how rich he'll be. They tell him how lucky he is to be getting so much money! He plays along, but he doesn't care. Even Kathleen, when she visits him, is cheery. She's much more talkative than usual, and she too wants him to be happy about all the money he's going to get. He is not happy. He simply notices how everybody in hospitals seems to take on a strange persona. Everybody is happy, or at least, everybody acts like they are happy. Everybody, that is, except him.

When the doctor arrives, the protagonist can see immediately that his secret is in danger of discovery. He cannot tell how much the doctor knows, but when the doctor asks probing questions, like "Are you afraid of suffering?" and "What are you afraid of?" the protagonist begins to get nervous. His only real fear is also his only release. Just as he tells the stranger on the ship the things about him that make the stranger hate him, he wants to tell the truth again. He wants the release. Yet, he doesn't tell the truth. When the doctor makes a seemingly innocuous comment about the river being calm on the surface, but restless beneath, like his patient, our protagonist does not rise to the bait. He refuses to let anything the doctor says be applied to him personally. All men are restless underneath, he replies. He must keep the doctor from getting to the truth, and so he must keep the doctor from seeing him too clearly.

The protagonist senses that the doctor is onto him, somehow. He just can't figure out how much he knows. They play a game wherein the doctor asks questions, and the protagonist does his best to provide an answer that will satisfy the question without actually revealing information. It is clearly something the protagonist has done before.

The next time the doctor returns to visit his patient, he is exuberant over his recent success in saving the life of a child. This exuberance is in stark contrast to the patient's total lack of emotion, which causes the doctor to be even more determined to unravel the mystery of this man who does not seem to value life. When he demands to know why his patient did not fight for his life while on the operating table, the protagonist is torn. The thing he most fears is being exposed, but part of him *wants* to tell the doctor everything, about Schmuel the slaughterer and Moishe the smuggler. He wants to explain that he died years ago even though his body still lives. He can't. He can't because he realizes that the doctor cannot live with such information. After all, "What





would become of humanity and of the laws of equilibrium if all men began to desire death?"

The protagonist realizes that their roles have reversed. It is now the doctor's life that is in the patient's hands. "I was telling myself: he doesn't know. And I alone can decide to tell him, to transform his future. At this very moment, I am his fate." The protagonist tries to explain to the doctor how once, while under anesthetic for the first time, he saw the face of God. It was different this time, he tells his doctor. *This* time he did not see God.

The doctor doesn't understand. It becomes clear that he does not, because he cannot. Our protagonist takes pity on the doctor and tells him what he wants to hear. Though his initial attempt is shallow and unconvincing, he finally settles on an argument that he knows the doctor will understand. He tells the doctor that he is in love with Kathleen. His lie has the desired effect: "The young doctor's face gradually assumed its usual expression. He had heard the words he wanted to hear. His philosophy wasn't threatened. Everything was in order again." This is something the doctor can believe in, the love of a woman. How could a man in love with an extraordinary woman like Kathleen *not* want to live?

Everything isn't in order again for the patient. He has told another lie. Had he told the truth instead, as he was tempted to do, he would have said that he was one of the living-dead: "You must look at them carefully. . . . These people have been amputated; they haven't lost their legs or eyes but their will and their taste for life. The things they have seen will come to the surface again sooner or later. And then the world will be frightened and won't dare look these spiritual cripples in the eye."

Another of the protagonist's visitors in this section is the lawyer Kathleen finds for him. He is smart, savvy and intuitive. He also sees things in his client that are best kept hidden. He understands, from the slight hesitation in his client's responses, that his client may very well have seen the cab before it hit him. He also understands that this is why his client is so determined to ensure that the driver of the cab is not the one who pays the legal settlement. The protagonist is not willing to make the driver suffer because of his own desire to die. The lawyer, being a lawyer, keeps his knowledge to himself. He wins his case, as good lawyers do, despite his knowledge of the part his client played in the accident.

As for Kathleen, she visits once near the beginning of this section. Our protagonist's memories of her and the five prior years are filled with insight into her own personal struggle. Her marriage to an older, very wealthy man has been the source of much suffering. She admits that she married him specifically because she did not love him, although he loved her. She wants to be miserable, to suffer. This is, once again, the symptom of her guilt at escaping the holocaust. She says in the beginning of the novel that she has not suffered enough. Now she says she has suffered greatly. She wants to return to the protagonist. She wants him to help her find herself again. He knows he cannot help her. He knows a lost soul can only push others into darkness, but he is too weak to resist her pleas. He agrees to help her, against his better judgment.





## Section 6

### Section 6 Summary

This section, which follows the very long section before it, is the shortest section in the book. It takes place four weeks after the accident and begins with a question: "Who is Sarah?"

Kathleen is visiting the protagonist and has asked him this question because she heard him say the name Sarah when he was in a coma, the day of the accident. He tells her that Sarah is his mother. When he was a young boy, he tells Kathleen, a teacher told him that three days after he died, an angel would come to him and ask him his name. She told him that when that happened, he must say, "I am Eliezer, son of Sarah." If he forgets to say both his own name and his mother's, the teacher tells him, then his spirit will be condemned to wander forever in chaos. "It is a serious thing to forget your mother's name. It is like forgetting your own origin," she tells him.

When Eliezer tells Kathleen this, she tells him that she likes the name Sarah because it has a Biblical sound to it. When Eliezer goes on to say that his mother is dead, Kathleen begins to cry.

### Section 6 Analysis

This is the first point in the novel where the protagonist is mentioned by name. The reader might assume this is done to give him a universal quality. It forces each person who reads this book to realize that the trauma, guilt, self-loathing and despair Eliezer feels is not confined to him alone, but something felt by all people who have experienced what he has. It would, perhaps, even be misleading to single him out by name, because in doing so one might make the mistake of thinking this is *his* story and only his. It is not. It is the story of many people.

When Eliezer tells Kathleen his story, it is impossible for her to hold back her tears. She is not crying simply because his mother is dead. She is crying because she realizes that in the mind of Eliezer, death has also taken him.



## Section 7

### Section 7 Summary

Our protagonist is in Paris after the war. He is reading at a cafe. A young blonde woman with blue eyes is watching him. She tries to attract his attention. After a while, he becomes embarrassed. He finally asks her if she knows him. She says she doesn't. She moves closer and sits down with him. She asks if he wants to make love. He is a virgin. In his virgin mind, people make love at night, not in the middle of the afternoon. He tells her he has no money, but she tells him that it is okay because he can pay her another time. He is also afraid that, being a virgin, he won't know what to do. He also realizes that if he does make love to this strange woman, it will somehow change him, and the fact that he will be different afterwards frightens him the most. Still, her smile intrigues him, and he decides to go with her.

The protagonist and the girl go to her room, and he locks the door. He knows from movies he has seen that men are supposed to kiss women before making love to them. He moves to her and roughly pulls her toward him, and then he kisses her. She does not return his kiss, and when he looks into her eyes, he sees in them the same look he might see in a frightened animal. He asks her what is wrong, and she pretends it is nothing. She asks him, again, to make love to her. He cannot. Suddenly his desire has turned into something else, a strong need to understand her. She senses his sudden change of heart and blames herself for ruining everything. She takes off her clothes and lies down on the bed in her underwear. The protagonist finds himself stroking her hair. He wants to talk. He wants her to tell him who she is.

The girl's name is Sarah, just like his mother's. She tells him how she was given to a Nazi soldier when she was twelve. She was his birthday present. The other women in the barracks where they found her tried to stop it. When he came to take her, they all undressed in front of him, telling him to take one of them. They said that they were not children and that she was too young. The soldier wanted someone young, so he took Sarah. She had many men after that. Now, many years later, Sarah makes her living giving herself to strangers. She wants to know if the reason Eliezer will not sleep with her is because she is too old. She tells him he would want her if she were twelve. He tells her that she is a saint. She laughs at him. She tells him she cannot be a saint. She confesses that at times her body feels pleasure. She tries to laugh at him, but her laughter is hollow. Then she tells him he is mad. She begins to shout at him. He tries to calm her, but he can't. She is shouting that she is not a saint. She is her body, and her body took pleasure from the men who used her. Eliezer cannot stand to hear her anymore. He runs from her apartment, out into the street, clutching his throat.



## Section 7 Analysis

The protagonist cannot separate his desire for Sarah from his compassion for her. He is unable to make love to her because he knows from her response to his kiss that she is not capable of making love. She is only capable of surrendering herself to a sexual act without humanity or compassion. He wants to understand her, but even as he asks her to tell him her story, he realizes that "To listen to a story under such circumstances is to play a part in it, to take sides, to say yes or no, to move one way or the other. From then on there is a before and after. And even to forget becomes a cowardly acceptance."

Eliezer stays and listens because he wants to feel her suffering and take on her humiliation. This is similar to the way in which Kathleen wants to take on Eliezer's suffering. They both seem to believe that sharing the pain and humiliation of another will somehow mitigate it. Perhaps they believe that the act of sharing another's pain will alleviate the guilt they feel from having escaped that specific form of suffering in the first place. Ironically, Eliezer's fear of being changed by his encounter with Sarah *is* realized. The change is not because he makes love to her, but because he understands her. What he comes to understand is that Sarah's life ended when she was twelve. When she takes men to her room, they think they are about to make love to a woman, but they are actually making love to a twelve-year-old child.

When Eliezer calls Sarah a saint, she reacts the same way Eliezer did when Kathleen called him a saint. Both Sarah and Eliezer have suffered, but they have also survived. As Eliezer tells Kathleen, those who are brutalized and have survived are not saints because the act of being brutalized turns those who live through into brutes themselves. Sarah's act of brutality is taking pleasure in the bodies of the men she sleeps with. She has committed, and continues to commit, a sin for which she cannot forgive herself. For this reason she, like Eliezer, can only scorn and ridicule whomever tries to call her a saint.



## Section 8

### Section 8 Summary

Kathleen and Eliezer are together. Her marriage has ended, and she is staying in a posh hotel in New York City. The two of them go out at night to concerts, the theatre and dinner. Despite their constant companionship, Kathleen becomes more and more depressed. She begins to drink too much. She becomes more and more withdrawn. Occasionally, they see something that might have moved them deeply once, and they remember that time long ago when life had meaning. Now, it has none. Just as Eliezer feared, their time together is not helping Kathleen. It is pushing her deeper into despair.

Kathleen tells Eliezer that she loves him. He stops her before she can say that she has loved him since the day they met. He tells her he loves her too, but she knows he doesn't. He is still trapped in the past. His past is more important to him than the present, more important than her. She tells him that if he truly loved her he would not have to say it.

One night, while Kathleen and Eliezer are in bed together, Kathleen asks him to forget the past. She wants him to promise that he will think only of her and her love. He says he will, but she can tell his mind won't listen. She knows he will continue to drift back to the place where she can't reach him. At one such moment, she catches him and asks him where he was before. He answers that he was at the train station. She is confused. Then he explains that the last time he saw his family was at the train station. It was also the last time he really felt alive.

Eliezer is standing on a platform. His parents have boarded the train. He thinks they have forgotten him. He wants to shout to them to come back, but then he notices the train is actually leaving its tracks and ascending into the sky. He wonders if he had shouted to them, would they have come back?

Kathleen asks him to make a promise. She asks him to tell her next time he is at the station. She says that if he does, they will fight it together. Eliezer agrees. The next day is the day of the accident.

### Section 8 Analysis

Kathleen, like the doctor, believes that if Eliezer truly loved her he would not continue to live in the past but would put all his energy toward their future together. Eliezer understands her reasoning, but he is unable to make good on his promise to forget. He says, "There, we said we would never forget. It still holds true. We cannot forget. Even if our eyes were no longer there, the images would remain. I think if I were able to forget I would hate myself."



At this point in the novel, Eliezer realizes he must leave Kathleen. He cannot give her what she wants. He knows his suffering only pushes her away, but he can't forget. She wants him to be happy, but the only way to be happy would be for time to move backward, for the train to have never left the platform. He tells himself he would stay with Kathleen if he could forget, but he can't. He also seems to understand that leaving her physically will not free her of him. This is why the accident occurs: the only way he can truly free her is to die.

## Section 9

### Section 9 Summary

In the final section of the novel, Eliezer describes his relationship with his friend Gyula, the painter. Gyula visits Eliezer every day in the hospital. Despite Eliezer's brush with death, Gyula enters the hospital room in his usual rough and boisterous way. He bullies the nurse into leaving just as she was about to give her patient his injection. He tells Eliezer that he should be ashamed of dying, and he makes Eliezer promise not to die before his portrait is finished. Gyula does not ask how the accident happened. When Eliezer tries to tell him, Gyula says he'd rather figure it out for himself.

One day, Gyula comes to visit but does not speak at all. For hours he just sits and works, in complete silence. Again, Eliezer asks if he can tell his friend about the accident. Gyula says he does not want to hear. Then, a week later, when the two of them are talking about other things, he tells Eliezer a story of his own. He tells Eliezer about his own unsuccessful drowning. He says while he was vacationing in the French Riviera, one day he swam out too far and got a cramp in his leg. He started to sink. Instead of trying to save himself, he found himself filled with calm. He tells his friend, "A strangely sweet serenity came over me. I thought: at last I'll know what a drowning man thinks about." So he let himself sink. He did not even try to save himself. He lost consciousness.

When Gyula came to, a group of people surrounded him, and he realized he had been saved. He tells Eliezer that he knew he should have been happy about it, but he was not. It was not until years later that this unsuccessful drowning made him "sing and laugh." When Gyula finishes his story, Eliezer asks him to listen to *his* story, but once again Gyula refuses. He tells his friend that he does not have to hear his story to know.

The day before Eliezer is scheduled to be released from the hospital, Gyula returns with a triumphant air. He tells his friend the portrait is finished. You can die now, he tells him. He puts the portrait on a chair, and after a moment's hesitation, he moves away to reveal it. The painting is mostly black, with a few red spots. The sun is dark gray, and Eliezer's "eyes were a beating red, like Soutine's. They belonged to a man who had seen God commit the most unforgivable crime: to kill without a reason."

With one look at the portrait, Eliezer realizes consciously, perhaps for the first time, that the accident was only an accident in "the most limited sense." He saw the cab, and if he had wanted to, he could have avoided it. What's more, he knows from the look his friend Gyula has captured in his portrait that Gyula knows it to. Gyula says to him that perhaps God is dead, but man is not. The proof is that friendship exists. When Eliezer tries to tell Gyula that the dead have no friends, Gyula tells him he must forget about them. The dead have no place among the living, and if they refuse to leave, he tells Eliezer, his friend must use a whip to drive them out.



When Eliezer asks Gyula why he put the dead in the eyes of his portrait, the painter says he assigned them a place so Eliezer would "know where to hit." It is man's duty to make his suffering cease, he tells Eliezer, not to add to it. "If your suffering splashes others, those around you, those for whom you represent a reason to live, then you must kill it, choke it. If the dead are its source, kill them again, as often as you must, to cut out their tongues." Then he tells Eliezer to also remember that the dead can no longer suffer, but the living can. He tells Eliezer to think not of the dead but of the living, to think of himself and Kathleen.

Eliezer is unable to stop thinking about the dead. He looks at the portrait, and he sees his grandmother in its eyes. Gyula, sensing his despair, becomes angry. He lights the portrait on fire, and it burns until nothing but a pile of ashes is left. Then Gyula leaves, leaving Eliezer alone, crying.

## Section 9 Analysis

When Gyula visits Eliezer, he does not show sympathy for his friend. He is rough and loud and irreverent. He refuses to comply with social norms that require niceties to quell fear or discomfort. He believes in taking things head on. It is refreshing for Eliezer, who has so many around him trying to offer comfort and support. Only Gyula understands that Eliezer needs tough love, not comfort. When Gyula paints his friend's portrait, he does so to capture the dead in Eliezer's past, as much as to capture his friend's likeness. As he says, he wants to show Eliezer where to find those ghosts who haunt him. He wants him to know where to find them so he'll know where to "hit." He wants his friend to be as tough as he is, because he knows that it is the only way to save him.

When Eliezer fails to take this lesson to heart, Gyula realizes that he must force it upon him. This is why he burns the portrait. He understands that to free his friend he must murder the demons that live inside him. The portrait has captured those demons. Hence, the destruction of the portrait will destroy their power over him. Gyula also knows that by leaving the ashes he is leaving tangible evidence of death. Much earlier in the novel, when Eliezer talks of his mother he says he sometimes had trouble believing she is dead. That's because he never saw her body. Now he has the ashes of all the dead that left him behind, everyone who has lived inside him for all those years. Now he can truly believe that they are dead, because he has their ashes as tangible proof of it.



# Characters

## Eliezer, the Protagonist

The protagonist of this story is based on the author, Elie Wiesel. He is a journalist who has survived the holocaust. In his preface, Wiesel explains, "I speak for my protagonist, but he does not speak for me. He has lived through some of my experiences, but I have not lived through his."

Wiesel uses his own life experiences to flesh out his character, but the actual events depicted in the novel are fiction. When the story begins, the protagonist is living in America. Yet, despite having survived the Holocaust, he is riddled with guilt, filled with despair and haunted by the dead.

## Kathleen

Kathleen is the dark-haired beauty Eliezer is with the night of the accident. Like the protagonist, her struggles with guilt and shame have caused her to be incapable of happiness. In fact, her strong need to suffer seems to be some sort of penance. It is as if her own happiness would be an insult to those who had their chance for happiness so brutally taken from them. For this reason, Kathleen is compelled to seek a life path that actually causes her the very pain and suffering her position as an American, who escaped the holocaust, should have allowed her to avoid. Kathleen is also a believer in love. Unlike Eliezer, she is not one of the living-dead. She loves and needs to be loved. In her mind, love conquers all.

## Shimon Yanai and Halina

Shimon Yanai and Halina are described together because they function, in the context of the novel, as a unit. Together, they are the catalyst for the protagonist's introduction to Kathleen. Shimon is the Paris representative for the Hebrew resistance movement. He is an attractive man with a Bohemian style characterized by rumpled clothes and tousled hair. Halina is a woman in her thirties, thin and drawn. She is a woman, as the protagonist describes her, with the frightened look of someone who is constantly struggling with her own past.

## The Doctor, Paul Russel

Dr. Russel is the physician who treats Eliezer after the accident. He is insightful enough to know that his patient is not like most men. Most men fight for their lives when they are on the operating table. Eliezer does not. Despite numerous attempts to understand why Eliezer is different, Dr. Russel fails. Instead, his patient outsmarts him by convincing the doctor that he does value life and that he wants to live. The doctor, unable to





comprehend a world in which life is not of the highest value, believes Eliezer, despite the evidence to the contrary. He believes him, not because Eliezer is so convincing, but because to doubt him would put in jeopardy the very foundation upon which Dr. Russel has based his life.

## **The Nurse**

The nurse who takes care of Eliezer after the accident is a relatively insignificant figure in her own right. She gives him injections, and she feeds him when he is too weak to feed himself. However, she is also the one who insists on shaving him and cleaning him up before his visitors arrive. When she first attempts to do this, Eliezer resists. She tells him that he needs to look well and that with his stubble he looks too sick to see visitors. He is sick, he tells her, scoffing at the idea of dressing himself up to look otherwise. She insists, and he allows her to shave his beard. The nurse, however, is not content with that. She wants him to look in the mirror, to see how well he looks. This time, she does not prevail. Eliezer will not look at himself. He threatens to break the mirror. This is symbolic of his need to see himself honestly. While he is willing to dress himself up to appease others, he will not allow himself to be appeased by such superficial changes.

## **Mark Brown, the Lawyer**

Mark Brown is described as a man with a "self-satisfied" air. He questions the protagonist regarding the accident. Eliezer hesitates to answer whether he saw the cab before he was hit. Mark Brown appears to intuit that his client did, indeed, see the cab approaching. The lawyer is very savvy, however, and does not betray his thoughts. He wins the case for his client, as he has promised to do. He also takes pains to explain that it will be the cab company, not the cab driver, who will pay the price. He understands from the protagonist's halting response to his earlier question that his client's concern for the driver is due to the fact that the accident was as much his client's fault as it was the fault of the driver.

## **Sandor, the Hungarian**

Sandor is one of three colleagues who visit the protagonist in the hospital. Sandor is the only one who is named. Sandor tells Eliezer that his accident will make him rich.

## **Schmuel, the Slaughterer**

Schmuel is a doctor who had been in hiding with the protagonist during the Holocaust. One night, when the Nazis were hunting Jews, Schmuel and Eliezer were in a bunker with several other people. There were about ten altogether. One of them was a baby, just a few months old. The baby wouldn't stop crying. Its mother, Golda, turned to Schmuel and asked him to make the baby stop. She told him to do it because she thought that he could accomplish the task without making the baby suffer too much.



Schmuel, who was used to slaughtering chickens, reached for the baby's throat. Ten lives for one, Schmuel reasons.

Schmuel is significant because he is one of the figures Eliezer remembers and identifies with whenever anybody calls him a saint for the suffering he has endured. Schmuel's brutality in murdering the child may have been necessary, but it was murder, just the same.

## **The Mother, Sarah**

Eliezer's mother, Sarah, is one of the many dead who haunt him. He says that he never saw her cry. He also says that he never allowed himself to express his love for her. He hardened himself against her because his love for her was so strong that he was afraid it would break him. In addition to having so much unexpressed emotion for his mother, Eliezer did not see her die. He never saw her body. For him, it is therefore possible, at times, to believe she is still alive. Logically, he knows she isn't, but emotionally, he has never fully processed her death. This makes her a particularly haunting figure in his gallery of ghosts.

## **The Grandmother**

Eliezer's grandmother is the person he most relied on when he was a child. When he needed comfort or understanding, he turned to her. When the weather is cold and windy, he imagines her ashes floating through the air, which torments him further. Later, when he looks at Gyula's portrait of him, he sees his grandmother's eyes. This time, instead of feeling tormented, he sees an expression of peaceful suffering on her face. She is telling him, "Fear nothing. I'll be wherever you are. Never again shall I leave you alone on a station platform." In death, as in life, she is finally able to comfort him as no one else can.

## **Sarah, the Young Prostitute**

Sarah is a prostitute working the streets of Paris after the war. She approaches Eliezer one day as he is reading the paper at a cafe. Sarah is also a survivor. She survived by sleeping with the enemy. She was twelve years old when she was given, as a birthday present, to a drunken Nazi soldier. Eliezer follows her to her room with the intention of making love to her, but when he kisses her and sees the look of horror in her eyes, he loses his sexual desire and wishes only to understand her. Her story is so horrific to him that it is almost more than he can bear.

## **The Old Prostitute**

Like the nurse, the old prostitute is most notable for the reaction she creates in Eliezer. When she propositions him, he laughs at her. He laughs at the absurdity of making love



to a dried-up old woman. Prior to her proposition, he had not laughed for a long time. When the war first ended, he had a difficult time getting used to thinking of himself as among the living. In his mind and in his heart, he had died with his family. When the old woman propositions him and he laughs again for the first time, it is also the first time since the war that he realizes that he is truly alive, not simply dead and dreaming of life.

## **The Stranger on the ship**

The stranger on the ship is the first person to whom Eliezer tells his story. Because they do not know each other, Eliezer feels comfortable divulging so much. It is, he says, like talking to stars when one talks to a stranger. There is no commitment. When Eliezer finishes his story, the stranger reacts in a way that surprises him. The stranger tells Eliezer, "I think I'm going to hate you." This is the most honest reaction Eliezer has received since the war ended. He has become accustomed to being pitied or treated like a saint. The stranger does not do this. Eliezer is glad for an honest reaction to the story he has told. He hates himself. Therefore, it only makes sense that after telling his story to someone else, that person should hate him too.

## **Kalman, the Cabalist**

Kalman is the teacher Eliezer remembers from his childhood. When Gyula speaks to Eliezer about suffering and the importance of leaving the dead behind, Eliezer actually believes he hears the voice of Kalman.

## **Gyula, the Painter**

Gyula is the friend who paints Eliezer's portrait. He is the one person who Eliezer knows understands him. In the last section of the novel, Gyula confronts Eliezer about the accident. He lets Eliezer know that he too has had a near death experience since he survived the holocaust, and like his friend Eliezer, Gyula welcomed it at the time. He also tells Eliezer that one must choose between the living and the dead.



# Objects/Places

## The Theater

The first meeting between the protagonist and Kathleen takes place at a theater in Paris. The theater is also where the two are headed when the accident occurs. Kathleen has suggested that they see they see *The Brothers Karamazov*, but Eliezer prefers to see something else: an average mystery, he says. He does not wish to have his thoughts provoked. Rather, he wants to use the theater to escape his thoughts. It is fitting, therefore, that on his way to the theatre, he foresees his ultimate escape: death.

## The Sea

The sea symbolizes death. While gazing at the sea from a ship heading to South America, the protagonist contemplates suicide. He is not alone in his desire to jump into the sea and disappear into oblivion. The stranger on the ship, with whom he has a conversation, has also felt the tug of the ocean. As he tells the protagonist, "One mustn't look at the waves for too long. Especially at night. Especially alone."

## The Hospital

The hospital is where Eliezer spends ten weeks recuperating from his accident. It is a sterile place, and as such, it has little to contribute to the story line. However, the very sterility of the place encourages Eliezer to spend his days within himself, revisiting other places, places that live only in his memory.

## The Concentration Camp

The concentration camp represents the holocaust, both literally and figuratively. Literally, it is the place where the protagonist lost his grandmother, his little sister and his parents. It is the place he saw the man hanged for cannibalism. It is where Schmuel, the slaughterer, silenced the crying baby. It is where Sarah, the prostitute, was taken at the age of twelve and given to a drunken Nazi.

Figuratively, the concentration camp is the atmosphere the protagonist projects on the passersby in Times Square. When he looks at them, he does not see the hustle and bustle of New York City. He does not see the living, moving through the square in eager anticipation of their next adventure. He sees the dead and dying, dried up and haggard, filled with self-loathing. Haunted by the cruel and inhumane treatment experienced while in the concentration camp, he carries the place within him, like a virus.



## The Mirror

When Eliezer is shaved and awaiting his visitors, he refuses to look into a mirror. He does not wish to see himself because he knows that he will see the worst of himself if he looks.

## The River

When Dr. Russel is talking with Eliezer during one of their visits, he tells Eliezer that the river only looks calm on the surface. Underneath, it is restless. While Eliezer shrugs this off as a description that might fit any man, the reader knows it is particularly true of Eliezer. He is a pretender who creates a facade to satisfy those around him, but his true nature is hidden, just like the nature of the river.

## Food & Drink

When the story begins, Eliezer is with Kathleen. When he admits he hasn't eaten all day, she insists that he must eat. Otherwise, he will slowly kill himself. She does not know that he wants to kill himself. To placate her, he agrees to eat, but after ordering his meal, he finds himself unable to consume it. The memory of the man who ate human flesh in front of him still haunts him. When he and Kathleen first meet, in Paris, they go to Kathleen's apartment. His cup is left untouched on the table. When he is in the hospital, after the accident, both the nurse and Kathleen try to feed him. He succumbs, but not because he is hungry. He succumbs because he is too tired to fight.

For Eliezer, food and drink have lost their appeal. Too many days and nights with nothing have conditioned him to do without, and having food is a source of guilt. What's more, to nourish himself is to prolong life. This makes no sense to a man who wants to die.

## Kathleen's Hotel in New York

When Kathleen returns to New York after leaving her husband in Boston, she takes up residence in one of the most expensive hotels in New York City. This detail is relevant because Kathleen spends most of her time here as she descends further into despair, drinking excessively and withdrawing from the world. The expensive nature of the hotel is in juxtaposition to the meagerness of her internal existence. Despite being surrounded by luxury, her inner life is without meaning or substance. This contrast is similar to the contrast in Eliezer's life. He has survived an accident that has left him with a large monetary settlement, but in his inner world, he is still impoverished.



## The Portrait

The portrait of Eliezer that Gyula paints is dark and depressing. In it, Eliezer sees the ghosts of the dead. Gyula meant for it to be that way. He knows, instinctively, that if the portrait can hold Eliezer's ghosts, then Eliezer will know where to find them. If he knows where they are, Gyula reasons, he can finally send them back to the grave.

## Grandmother's Black Shawl

When Eliezer steals money from his father to give to the orphan boy, he turns to his grandmother for comfort. She is described as wearing a black shawl on her head. This is a symbol of comfort to Eliezer. The reader knows this because when Eliezer first awakens from his coma and the doctor tells him "she" is waiting to see him, Eliezer believes the doctor is talking about his grandmother. He is afraid to see her at that moment because he "was afraid she wouldn't be as I remembered her. I was afraid she wouldn't have the black shawl on her head."

Later, when Eliezer stares at the portrait of himself, he sees his grandmother in it. This time she speaks to him. She tells him, "I'll take you with me. In the train that goes to heaven, and you won't see the earth anymore. I'll hide you from it in my black shawl."



# Social Sensitivity

As in all of Elie Wiesel's books, the primary social concern is the suffering of Holocaust victims, even decades after the conclusion of World War II.

Wiesel demonstrates how the effects of the suffering are incessant, and that they do not cease or even diminish over time.

The protagonist informs an Englishman whom he encounters that he is "now just a messenger of the dead among the living." Although the Holocaust survivor has endured, Wiesel implies, he only remains partly alive. Part of the survivor dies with the victims whose deaths he observes, and he only remains alive so that he may provide testimony of the atrocities that he has witnessed. The testimony of the Holocaust survivor is important, and that is one of the reasons why Kathleen is attracted to him.

Because the survivor is only partly alive, he might have a yearning for death.

The narrator confesses that the accident in which he was struck by a car is, in part, a death wish. He saw the taxi cab coming toward him but chose not to evade it; he could have avoided the accident but made the conscious, albeit split-second, decision to stand his ground. Scholars have sometimes argued that Jewish survivors of the Holocaust experienced tremendous guilt because six million died while they survived; consequently, some feel the need to suffer the same anguish and death of the victims who were not so lucky. They wondered if it were fair that they should live while others did not. The narrator expresses this sentiment and perhaps wants to experience the same fate as the victims. Wiesel thus portrays the inevitable psychological damage suffered by some—but not all—Holocaust victims.

As the novel begins, the narrator talks mysteriously about "the accident." As he walks with his girlfriend Kathleen through New York City in order to see the movie *The Brothers Karamazov*, a taxi cab hits him, and he is almost killed. He spends several weeks in the hospital, under the medical care of Dr. Paul Russel. The narrator barely survives the accident, and the rest of the novel, like many of Wiesel's novels, shifts back and forth between the present and the past, between the tragedy of the accident and the tragedy of the Holocaust. Wiesel effectively links the two, implying that the suffering during the Holocaust has led to the desire to suffer again. In fact, Dr.

Russel angrily—and rightfully—accuses the narrator of refusing to help him while the victim lay on the operating table.

Russel asks the narrator, "Why don't you care about living? . . . I guessed. During the operation. You never helped me. Not once. You abandoned me. I had to wage the fight alone, all alone. Worse. You were on the other side, against me, on the side of the enemy." The narrator denies Russel's charge to his face, yet he confesses to the reader that the doctor's accusation is unequivocally accurate.



Thus, Wiesel's novel focuses on a very crucial and topical social concern—the welfare of the Holocaust survivors after the war. *The Accident* is a book that sheds light on the fates of hundreds of thousands of Holocaust survivors whose lives were ruined because of the war. Scores of Jews, such as prominent writers Primo Levi and Jerzy Kosinsky, did, in fact, commit suicide years after they survived the Holocaust. *The Accident* manifests that although some Jews managed to survive the concentration camps, they could not escape the suffering, shock, and the inevitable psychological trauma that would haunt them throughout their remaining years.

During his flashback, the narrator reminisces about Holocaust victims whom he has encountered, as if he feels doomed to suffer and to testify regarding the anguish of others. He seems almost to enjoy the pain that he experiences, perhaps because he realizes that others have suffered more than he. Consequently, their suffering, such as that of the prostitute Sarah, becomes a part of his pain; thus, they become a part of him.

Perhaps that is why Wiesel mentions the narrator's name only once: The narrator has lost his identity and becomes almost the personification of suffering and death.



# Techniques

As with many of his novels, Wiesel draws upon autobiographical information in his characterization of the protagonist.

Like Wiesel, the novel's protagonist is a Holocaust survivor named Eliezer who works as a reporter and who suffers a horrendous and nearly fatal accident when run over by a cab driver in New York. Dr. Paul Russel is clearly modeled after Dr. Paul Braunstein, the doctor who saved Wiesel's life after he was run over by a taxi cab and to whom the novelist dedicates this book. Furthermore, the protagonist, like the novelist, has a mother named Sarah.

As with many of his books, Wiesel's narrative in *The Accident* continuously weaves back and forth between the past and the present, guided thematically in a loose order. Wiesel employs a stream of consciousness: Events in the narrator's present experience remind him of past events, causing his mind—and that of the reader—to return to similar events that have already taken place. For instance, during the first day in which the protagonist was in a coma, he called out the name Sarah, which was the name of his mother. When Kathleen asks him who Sarah is, he declares that it is his mother's name, and she is satisfied with this answer. However, the discussion about the name reminds him of the prostitute Sarah, a Holocaust survivor with whom he had sex.

Wiesel also creates suspense in the novel by not mentioning initially the cause of the accident. The protagonist says on several occasions during the first several pages that he may have been awaiting an accident, yet he refuses to say whether he, himself, was involved. The protagonist declares that although he and Kathleen were walking to see a movie, "We still were in the same spot. Why hadn't we moved? Perhaps we were waiting for the accident." The suspense that Wiesel creates piques the reader's curiosity as to who is involved in the accident and if anyone is hurt. But the suspense and the mystery during the early pages serve another purpose as well: They allow the reader to consider the possibility that the protagonist—who is also the victim—has planned to hurt himself and die that day. The foreshadowing clues in this novel, provided by the narrator, suggest that he intentionally allowed himself to be in the way of the speeding taxi cab and that he has a death wish.



# Themes

## Themes

The predominant theme in *The Accident* is death: the protagonist is a messenger from the dead to the living. Part of him has died during the Holocaust, and he currently experiences a living death. He neglects to evade a speeding car because he yearns for death. Wiesel implies that for some Holocaust survivors, death serves as an escape if they can no longer handle the guilt of surviving while their loved ones and friends perished before their eyes. Death becomes the preoccupation of many characters. Gyula, for instance, demands that the narrator refrain from dying until he has painted his portrait. Gyula remarks, "Don't die before I've finished your portrait, do you hear?"

Afterwards, I don't give a darn! But not before! Understood?"

All the characters in Wiesel's novel have a story to tell regarding death. Gyula almost drowned in the ocean; he implies that it was an attempted suicide. He went out too far into the water and gave up, allowing himself to sink: "There was no fear in me. I knew that I was dying, but I remained calm. A strangely sweet serenity came over me, I thought: at last I'll know what a drowning man thinks about. That was my last thought. I lost consciousness." However, as was the case during the Holocaust, he escaped death. This time a young swimmer rescued him— even though he did not want her to do so. In fact, after he regained consciousness, he quickly cursed the woman for rescuing him, preventing him from dying.

Kathleen is fascinated by death and falls in love with the narrator partly because he has seen so much death and is experiencing a living death. Even Sarah is deadened, no longer herself. She sees a look of death in the narrator at a Paris cafe and therefore brings him to her room to make love. She is a nymphomaniac, yet she is also lifeless. Because the German soldiers repeatedly raped her starting when she was twelve years old, she has lost her will to live. Her life has no meaning. The countless violations of her body have dehumanized her, rendering her a mere object rather than a human being. She laments her sad existence and would willingly escape from it. The German soldier who took away her virginity says that the sexual encounter is a birthday present for him. But the day of the Nazi's birth becomes the first day of a continuing death for her. The atrocities that she has endured have obviously scarred her for life, rendering her unable to have stable relationships. She believes, for instance, that all men disdain sex with women, only desiring intercourse with twelve-year-old girls. Her mental instability, like that of Eliezer, the narrator, causes her to endure a living death. As the narrator remarks, "I think of her and I curse myself, as I curse history which has made us what we are: a source of malediction. History which deserves death, destruction. Whoever listens to Sarah and doesn't change, whoever enters Sarah's world and doesn't invent new gods and new religions, deserves death and destruction." The novelist implies that history itself must die.



The novel is nihilistic. Can God exist if something this awful happens to Sarah?

Where was God when all this took place?

If God is omnipotent and omnipresent, how could he have allowed Sarah to suffer so much? It is noteworthy that Sarah is not only the name of the narrator's mother, but also of the mother of the Jewish people. Wiesel implies, therefore, that God has allowed all of the Jewish people to suffer greatly. Gyula, whose name means "redemption," hopes to redeem the life of Eliezer. Gyula, who himself has metaphorically returned several times from the dead, intends to convince the narrator to live rather than die by showing him the importance of forgetting the past and living for the present.

He paints the portrait of the narrator, which symbolizes the past, and then proceeds to burn it—indicating that Eliezer must put the past behind him.

However, the ashes remain, suggesting that it will be impossible for the narrator to do so.

Through his characterization of Sarah, Wiesel addresses the irony that the Nazis persecuted Jews because they considered them to be grossly inferior, almost subhuman, yet when they wished to satisfy their sexual desires, they could not ignore their attraction to Jewish women. By engaging in sex with Jews, they symbolically acknowledged that the Jews were by no means inferior beings. Therefore, the forced employment of Jewish prostitutes symbolically acknowledged that the persecution was based on economic and propagandistic, rather than racial, issues.

## The Living-Dead

The main theme running through this novel is the concept of the living-dead. In fact, this theme is brought to stark attention even before the novel begins. The quote preceding the first page of text, from the novel *Zorba the Greek*, reads:

"I was once more struck by the truth of the ancient saying: Man's heart is a ditch full of blood. The loved ones who have died throw themselves down on the bank of this ditch to drink the blood and so come to life again; the dearer they are to you, the more of your blood they drink."

The concept of the living-dead is played out in the very first page of *The Accident*. When Eliezer and Kathleen are walking through Times Square, they are on their way to a movie. One might assume they are on a date. Yet Wiesel's description of the scene is anything but romantic. He describes the air as suffocating and the heat as sticking to skin, "like a curse." He goes on to describe the passersby as haggard, decaying, filled with disgust at their own bodies.

Clearly, the writer is projecting his own sense of despair and self-loathing onto the people he sees. There is no anticipation of the film he is about to see. He expresses no romantic longings for his date, despite the fact that Kathleen is so beautiful that



strangers are compelled to comment on it. He mentions his work and says that he is tired and has spent the day writing so many words about nothing. Yet when most people think about writers they think about people who are inspired by passion and creativity. This is not true of Eliezer. He is unable to connect with any sense of joy or happiness. He is one of the living-dead.

## The Connection Between Suffering and Sainthood

When Kathleen meets Eliezer, she tells him that Shimon thinks he is a saint. Eliezer is appalled at the idea. He tells Kathleen that the only ones who are saints from suffering are those who died. Those who live through suffering of the kind to which he was exposed are not saints. This is because the brutality to which they have been subjected is so extreme that it renders them desperate, and they become brutes.

Eliezer describes Schmuel, the slaughter, and how he murdered a tiny baby in order to keep it quiet so others might escape the Nazis as they hunted for Jews in hiding. He tells her that when one is brutalized to the point where one is willing to sell one's soul - or worse, the soul of another - for a piece of bread or a glass of water or a bit of sleep, one cannot be a saint.

Interestingly, Eliezer calls the prostitute Sarah a saint. She too lived through the holocaust. The difference, however, is that Sarah's sins did not result in actions that injured or sacrificed others. Sarah, who was raped and prostituted from the time she was twelve, is a saint in Eliezer's eyes for that very reason. Sarah sees it differently. Her reaction to being called a saint is exactly like Eliezer's reaction when Kathleen calls him one. Sarah has not brutalized others. Still, her profession as a prostitute and the fact that she finds herself at times enjoying the physical pleasure of sex are despicable to her sensibilities. She is unable to see herself as anything but a whore. To Sarah, also one of the living-dead, a saint is pure and without sin. She is incapable of making the distinction between one who has been forced into her sins and one who welcomes them. She says, "I am my body," and therefore, when her body sins, she becomes a sinner.

## Love Conquers All

The issue of the power of love is first brought up in the novel when the protagonist is taken to the hospital after the accident. Kathleen is with him. She asks the doctor what she can do, and he tells her to pray. Later, he asks her if she loves his patient. She says she does. There is hope then, he tells her, for sometimes love is stronger than prayer.

When the doctor brings up the subject of love again, a week later, he is hoping to trigger a response that will provide some hint of the reason for the restlessness beneath the seeming calm of his patient's demeanor. The mention of Kathleen and of love brings only the expected, rote, affirmation. It brings the doctor no closer to understanding his patient's inner workings.



Part of the problem with introducing the concept of a love that conquers all is that the protagonist doesn't believe in it. When he is first admitted to the hospital, he remembers that he was with Kathleen when the accident occurred, but he does not want her to see him in the hospital. He does not want her to try to use the power of love to help him. He thinks to himself, "She's a charming girl, extremely charming, but she doesn't understand. She doesn't understand that death is not the enemy. . . . She has too much faith in the power, in the omnipotence of love."

However, when the protagonist realizes that the doctor's belief in the power of love is one that can be used to convince the doctor of his will to live, he uses it. He is faced with the prospect of either explaining to the doctor that he is nothing but a walking corpse, unmoved by the struggle to stay alive, or finding a way to convince the doctor that he values life and wants to live. He uses the idea of an all-powerful love to convince the doctor of something he does not believe himself. He tells the doctor that he loves Kathleen, and he suggests to the doctor that a man in love could not possibly fail to value life. The doctor believes him. However, the readers know that Eliezer does not believe his own words.

Not until the end of the novel, when the protagonist's friend Gyula tells him he must choose between the living and the dead, do the readers see the possibility for Eliezer to realize the power of love. He can only realize it, however, if he is willing to release the dead and embrace life.



# Style

## Point of View

This story is told from the first person, limited, point of view. Readers know the protagonist's thoughts and feelings and are privy to his experiences. However, the thoughts and feelings of the other characters are unknown to the reader, save what the protagonist surmises.

As the story progresses, the protagonist moves in and out of the present. Sometimes he is recalling the past, and sometimes he is having an inner dialogue. This allows readers to follow the action of the story from his perspective, but it also gives us an inside look at the ruminations that are triggered in him by the events of both the past and present.

## Setting

The story begins in New York City. It is a hot, muggy night. Interestingly, the weather plays as important a part in this first section, as does the location. Both stir up feelings within our protagonist that amplify his sense of despair and self-loathing. It is in this particular setting that the accident occurs.

The remainder of the action takes place in the hospital, where Eliezer is sent to recover. The hospital itself is simply a neutral place with very little to contribute to the story. However, there is an interesting aspect of Eliezer's confinement that is worthy of note. He finds that he thinks differently while lying down. At the beginning of Section 9, after spending ten weeks in the hospital, he says "I learned that man lives differently, depending on whether he is in a horizontal or vertical position. The shadows on the walls, on the faces, are not the same."

## Language and Meaning

The most notable linguistic choice Wiesel makes in his novel is his decision not to give a name to his protagonist until well into the book. Even then, when the character says his name, it is in the context of a mantra he's been taught to repeat. He is told that when he dies, he must tell the angel that comes for him that his name is Eliezer and his mother is Sarah. When he recalls this directive, readers hear his name for the first and only time. Thereafter, he once again becomes nameless. This is one of the keys to the story. It may even be the point of it. Eliezer is one of many. To name him is to define him as a single unit, an individual, separate from all others. To leave him nameless is to give him a place in the life of every person who has survived the horrors of the holocaust.

Wiesel is also fond of using the *non sequitur* to present ideas in a somewhat cryptic but effective way. One of the best examples of this is in the third paragraph of Section 9. "Three people came to see me every day. Paul Russel came in the morning; Kathleen in



the evening; Gyula in the afternoon. He alone had guessed. Gyula was my friend." The last two lines about Gyula don't seem to make sense, as they are placed. What has Gyula guessed? Why is the author stating the obvious when it comes to Gyula's friendship? How do these two lines tie into what directly precedes it?

The answer is that Gyula has guessed Eliezer's secret: Eliezer sees the cab, and he *lets* it hit him. This follows the mention of the two other visitors to provide the contrast to them. Gyula *alone* has guessed. Kathleen does not, nor does Dr. Russel. As for the seemingly obvious statement, "Gyula was my friend," Wiesel is telling the reader here that friends, true friends, understand each other. What's more, they understand without being told, and they understand without judgment. Gyula, alone, understands what no one else does. Gyula has figured it out by himself. Gyula, therefore, is a friend in the most intimate sense. That is a lot of information for two seemingly misplaced lines. This is one of the hallmarks of Wiesel's use of language.

Another important note: while the original novel was written in French, and we are reading it in English, this is not a translation. Elie Wiesel lived in America. Therefore, unlike many books that are written in other languages, this was not translated by a third party. Each word in this novel was carefully crafted by the author for its specific impact. Nothing is a matter of chance or the result of a possible loss in translation.

## Structure

*The Accident* is written as a novel in nine sections. The sections vary in length, with some sections containing as few as three pages (Section 6), while others are as long as twenty-seven pages (Section 5). The sections are roughly equivalent to chapters, with subsections indicated by an additional line of space. This tells the reader that the subject, time period or location is changing. It may also indicate that the reader is being taken from the action of the main story to a memory or perhaps an inner dialogue.





## Quotes

"They had known how to fight hunger, conquer fear, and outmaneuver the myriad perils that had plagued them *during* the reign of Night. But once the world had more or less returned to 'normal,' they gave up." *Preface*

"You see, Doctor, what people say is true: man carries his fiercest enemy within himself." Section 1, pg. 22

"To talk to a stranger is like talking to stars: it doesn't commit you." Section 4, pg. 45

"Suffering brings out the most cowardly in man. There is a phase of suffering you reach beyond which you become a brute: beyond it you will sell your soul - and worse, the souls of your friends - for a piece of bread, for some warmth, for a moment of oblivion, of sleep. Saints are those who die before the end of the story. The others, those who live out their destiny, no longer dare look themselves in the mirror, afraid they may see their inner image: a monster laughing at unhappy women and at saints who are dead . . . ." Section 4, pg. 49

"You want to know who I am, truly? I don't know myself. Sometimes I am Schmuel, the slaughterer. Look at me carefully. No, not at my face. At my hands." Section 5, pg. 73

"What would become of humanity and of the laws of equilibrium if all men began to desire death?" Section 5, pg. 71

"I was telling myself: he doesn't know. And I alone can decide to tell him, to transform his future. At this very moment, I am his fate." Section 5, pg. 71

"The young doctor's face gradually assumed its usual expression. He had heard the words he wanted to hear. His philosophy wasn't threatened. Everything was in order again." Section 5, pg. 76

"You must look at them carefully. . . . These people have been amputated; they haven't lost their legs or eyes but their will and their taste for life. The things they have seen will come to the surface again sooner or later. And then the world will be frightened and won't dare look these spiritual cripples in the eye." Section 5, pg. 75

"It is a serious thing to forget your mother's name. It is like forgetting your own origin." Section 6, pg. 82

"To listen to a story under such circumstances is to play a part in it, to take sides, to say yes or no, to move one way or the other. From then on there is a before and after. And even to forget becomes a cowardly acceptance." Section 7, pg. 90

"There, we said we would never forget. It still holds true. We cannot forget. Even if our eyes were no longer there, the images would remain. I think if I were able to forget I would hate myself." Section 8, pg. 105





"I learned that man lives differently, depending on whether he is in a horizontal or vertical position. The shadows on the walls, on the faces, are not the same." Section 9, pg. 110

"My eyes were a beating red, like Soutine's. They belonged to a man who had seen God commit the most unforgivable crime: to kill without a reason." Section 9, pg. 116

"If your suffering splashes others, those around you, those for whom you represent a reason to live, then you must kill it, choke it. If the dead are its source, kill them again, as often as you must, to cut out their tongues." Section 9, pg. 118

## Key Questions

Group discussions might begin with the question of the narrator's decision to allow the car to run him over. Why can't he cope with what he endured and witnessed? The answers to these questions should provoke much valuable discussion. The importance of Gyula's entry late in the novel and his esoteric ramblings should help provide insight into the narrator's decision to end his life and his attempt to hinder Dr. Russel's treatment of him immediately after the accident.

The issues of death and nihilism as symbolized by the narrator lead to an examination of his personality. Do readers like the narrator; do they consider him too nihilistic; do they view him as a traumatized individual?

Group discussions should include some historical information regarding the Holocaust because people who are unfamiliar with it may have difficulty understanding the conflicts, fear, and shame that Eliezer experiences.

1. What role do the supporting characters such as Kathleen, Sarah, Dr. Russel, and Gyula play in the novel?
2. As the novel concludes, with Gyula leaving the protagonist, do you feel that there is hope for Eliezer's emotional wellbeing?
3. The novelist provides some autobiographical information in the book. Does that add to the novel or does it distract the reader because *The Accident* is a work of fiction?
4. What are the importance of flashbacks in Wiesel's novel? How do they illuminate the character and ethos of the protagonist?
5. What role does sexuality play in developing the themes and social issues?
6. How has Eliezer's faith been affected by the Holocaust? Does he still believe in God?
7. When Eliezer is run over by a taxi cab, he is on the way to see a movie version of Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*. Why does Wiesel pick this movie?
8. Why does the narrator lie to Dr.

Russel about his desire to die? Why can't he tell the doctor the truth? Is he afraid of the doctor's views or does he believe that anyone who has not suffered during the Holocaust cannot comprehend his feelings?

# Topics for Discussion

Why does Kathleen say she has not suffered enough?

Why is the protagonist concerned about the cab driver and how he might suffer as a result of the accident?

Why does the doctor question the protagonist about his love for Kathleen?

Why does Gyula burn the portrait of the protagonist? Why does he leave the ashes?

Discuss the significance of the stranger on the ship to whom the protagonist tells his story. Why does the stranger tell Eliezer that he thinks he is going to hate Eliezer?

Discuss the concept of survivor guilt.

Discuss the connection between sainthood and suffering.

## Literary Precedents

Several memoirs of Holocaust survivors serve as literary precedents, for they demonstrate, as Wiesel does, the impossibility of returning to normal life after the Holocaust. Two influential memoirs with which Wiesel would no doubt be familiar are Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* (1958) and Tadeusz Borowski's *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* (1948).

These two works manifest how a Holocaust survivor, such as Eliezer (the narrator), can be affected forever by the atrocities. Levi, an Italian chemist, and Borowski, a Polish underground writer, describe how life in Auschwitz ruined their lives forever, how they could never recover. In fact, Levi committed suicide in 1987 and Borowski took his own life by opening a gas valve in 1951. Their autobiographies are similar to Wiesel's characterization of Eliezer, and they took their own lives, as Eliezer attempts to do in *The Accident*.

Another literary precedent is William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1600-1601). Eliezer and Hamlet have seen death (although in Shakespeare's drama, the anguish and suffering are on a much smaller scale) and feel the need to end their lives because they cannot live with the feelings of guilt.

The protagonists experience feelings of helplessness and contemplate suicide.

Sarah's horrific experiences have precedents in the eighteenth-century British novel. Novels by Henry Mackenzie (*The Man of Feeling*), Samuel Richardson (*Pamela*, 1740, and *Clarissa*, 1747-1748), and John Cleland (*Fanny Hill*, 1748-1749) describe situations in which a woman living in an oppressed society is raped and consequently forced into prostitution.

The sin is not her fault because she has no control over her situation. For social and psychological reasons, the woman must remain a prostitute. A similar misfortune happens to Bianca in Thomas Middleton's seventeenth-century play, *Women Beware Women* (1621).

Eliezer's inability to return emotionally to society after the horrors that he has witnessed may remind the reader of the protagonist in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Young Goodman Brown* (1835).



## Related Titles

The Accident is like Wiesel's novel Dawn (1960; see separate entry) in several respects. For instance, both include female characters, Kathleen in The Accident and Catherine in Dawn, who are fascinated by, and who wish to have romantic and sexual relationships with, men who have survived the Holocaust and who have seen much death in their lives. In The Accident, Wiesel continues his characterization of women obsessed with men who have suffered great emotional loss during the Holocaust. He clearly patterns the character Kathleen upon Catherine in Dawn. As with his other works, Wiesel binds together the themes of suffering and sexuality.

Another similar work by Wiesel is his play entitled The Trial of God (1979). In this play, Holocaust victims put God on trial; the play is based on an actual event that Wiesel witnessed while he was interned in Auschwitz. As Wiesel watched and cried, several rabbis put God on trial for allowing the atrocities to occur. In The Accident, similarly, the protagonist puts God on trial, pondering why He would permit the Holocaust to happen and allow millions of innocent people to suffer. Eliezer even questions the existence of God.

Another theme that Wiesel weaves through many of his books is that of the inability to cope with loss after the Holocaust. The characters are often confronted by people who cannot understand why survivors still suffer decades after the war. These people, along with Wiesel's readers, come to understand that Holocaust survivors can never recover as represented by Elisha in Dawn and Elhanan and Hershel in The Forgotten (1992).

Those who come to comprehend the suffering of others include Catherine in Dawn and Malkiel and Lidia in The Forgotten.



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