A Good Day Study Guide

A Good Day by Primo Levi

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

As a chapter in Primo Levi's 1947 Holocaust memoir *Survival in Auschwitz*, "A Good Day" offers an intimate, first-hand account of life in World War II concentration camps. The attempt by Nazi Germany to exterminate Europe's Jewish population in the 1930s and 1940s stands as one of history's most notorious episodes of racism and hatred. Millions died in camps created for the express purpose of genocide, and the majority of those murdered were of Jewish descent. It would be easy to simply acknowledge that the events occurred and avoid the details of what happened to these people, for they are appalling and brutal. However, for those who survived, the urge to bear witness—to make humanity confront what was allowed to happen and in doing so perhaps prevent such inhumanity from occurring again—often struggles against the instinct never to revisit such a debasing experience. Levi had the misfortune of being one of thousands of Italian Jews transported to the Auschwitz camp in Poland. He was one of the few to survive, return to his native land, and resume his life as before.

In this brief chapter, many of the major themes of Levi's book are expressed strongly, much of it based on the corruption of human achievement in the service of inhumane goals. The very hierarchy of the camp embodies such corruption. Far from being an undifferentiated mass, a number of factors lead to different levels of status among the prisoners, such as their reason for imprisonment, their ethnicity, and their length of imprisonment at the camp. Language also plays a part in the hierarchy. The gathering of prisoners from across Europe has created a cacophony of voices, creating a "Tower of Babel" at the Buna factory's Carbide Tower, where Levi works as slave labor during his time in Auschwitz. Moreover, the official language of the camps—German—is used to further alienate, humiliate, and confuse the prisoners, as many did not speak or understand it. As someone who deeply appreciates the virtues of work and craftsmanship, Levi sees how the slavery of the camps perverts those values. "A Good Day" examines how existence in the face of these dehumanizing conditions affects a person's mental state. As Levi writes in the preface of Simon & Schuster's 1996 edition, his aim in writing *Survival in Auschwitz* was to "furnish documentation for a quiet study of certain aspects of the human mind."

Though trained as a chemist, Levi balances a reporter's eye for capturing details of camp life with a poet's sensitivity to the toll the parade of injuries takes on the human spirit. Vivid images of harsh life in the Lager (camp) are often balanced by a philosophical perspective on the realities of human nature that is equally unforgiving. Levi explains the very notion of a "good" day in a situation as horrible as Auschwitz, asserting that humans can never be completely happy or unhappy, as they allow themselves only to consider the most immediate cause of such emotions. In the story, the promise of coming warm weather after a harsh winter allows the prisoners to stop thinking about the unrelenting cold, only to find themselves focused on their constant hunger. Then, by a stroke of good luck, even hunger is staved off for a few hours with an unexpected extra ration of soup. With these constant causes of unhappiness and discomfort momentarily alleviated, Levi describes how the men can briefly be unhappy —since one unhappiness is always replaced with another—like free men and

concentrate on the troubles that have nothing to do with the camp. A "good" day is relative.

Amid this undeniable bleakness, Levi also describes small signs of hope—from the boast of the Greek Felicio that he will be home next year, to the painful dreams of home and food, to the reprieve gained on this one day—which prove the natural resilience of the human spirit. Levi wisely recounts these moments as well; as a result, his work is not only a powerful account of the a great abomination, but also a clear-eyed testament to the virtues necessary to defy such evil. As he warns in his preface, "The story of the death camps should be understood by everyone as a sinister alarm-signal."

Author Biography

Primo Levi

Primo Michele Levi was born July 31, 1919, in the Italian city of Turin. After graduating from the University of Turin with a degree in chemistry, he joined the Italian resistance during World War II. He was captured by the Fascist militia in December 1943, placed in an internment camp in Italy, and sent to Auschwitz soon after. He survived at the camp for a year until it was liberated by Allied forces in January 1945. Afterward, he returned home to his life in Turin.

Levi wrote two memoirs of his experiences in the camps and his journey home, *If This is a Man* and *The Truce*; when published in the United States, these works were later renamed *Survival in Auschwitz* and *The Reawakening*, respectively. Levi worked at the SIVA chemical factory as a research chemist for most of his life, even as his writing came to worldwide renown. He wrote essays, poetry, short stories, a novel (*If Not Now, When?*), and further memoirs such as *The Periodic Table*. Levi retired from SIVA in 1977 to pursue a full-time writing career.

Said to be suffering from depression at the time, Levi fell over a banister down three flights of stairs and died on April 11, 1987. His death was ruled a suicide by the Italian government, but many believe it was an accident.

At midday, Levi's Kommando is greeted with more good news back at their hut. Along with their usual sparse meal rations, there are eleven extra gallons of soup obtained by Templer, their Kommando's official organizer. Each person will receive six extra pints of soup that day: two pints at lunch, and in the afternoon they will take turns coming in from the Buna to have the final four pints. This means both extra food and a five-minute break to eat the afternoon portion: "What more could one want?" As they take their breaks in the afternoon, the Kapo of their hut asks in German who still has to eat, using the word *fressen*, which describes animals eating, instead of *essen* for humans eating. Levi considers this a correct word choice, given their wildly enthusiastic consumption. Meister Nogalla, the Polish civilian superintendent of their Kommando, turns a blind eye to the five-minute soup absences. Levi thinks that if it were not for social convention, perhaps he would even share in the soup. When it is Templer's turn to eat, it is agreed by all that he will take ten pints from the bottom of the pot, which holds the richest portion of the soup. Before he does so, he takes advantage of his ability to empty his bowels at will, enabling him to eat more whenever the opportunity affords itself.

At the end of the day, the men of Levi's hut do not worry about the cold and for a few hours do not feel hunger. The Kapo does not want to hit them, and they are able to think of their mothers and wives. Thus, for a brief time, they find themselves "unhappy in the manner of free men."

Plot Summary

"A Good Day" opens with Primo Levi's observation that by nature people must believe in some purpose in life. For those in the camps, their sole purpose is to survive until spring, nothing more. As they stand in the freezing wind during roll call, they watch the horizon for signs of the coming spring, such as longer daylight and warmer weather. They are waiting for the weather to improve and the cold to "call a truce," so that they have one less enemy in their lives. On this day, the sun is warm and clears away the mist; fellow prisoner Ziegler observes, "The worst is over." Levi notices a group of Greek Jews, who have been at the camp for three years, chanting among themselves. One of them, Felicio, greets Levi and shouts, "*L'année prochaine à la maison!… à la maison par la Cheminée!*" ("Home by next year!… At home by the fireplace!") Felicio and the other Greeks return to their singing.

When the fog clears, the prisoners can see the area surrounding the camp. They see mountains, a church steeple in the city of Auschwitz, the factory where the prisoners work, and Birkenau, the nearby extermination camp. The sight of Birkenau causes their chests to tighten, for though they know their wives, sisters, and mothers "finished there," and though they will probably do so as well, they are "not used to seeing it." The prisoners notice that the meadows by the road are green, but the Buna is not. The grayness of the factory stands in contrast to the signs of spring in nature. The Buna is a factory where synthetic rubber is supposed to be manufactured (but never is). Over forty thousand foreigners from all over Europe work there. The prisoners live in different Lagers (camps) surrounding the Buna. Levi's own Lager (*Judenlager*, or "Jew Camp") provides ten thousand of the workers and functions as "the slaves of the slaves," the bottom of the hierarchy. His Kommando—the group of workers from his hut—helped build the Carbide Tower rising from the middle of the Buna. They refer to the edifice as a Tower of Babel, after the biblical story in which God thwarts a plan to build a tower into Heaven by confusing the workers' languages until they could neither understand nor be understood: "in it we hate the insane dream of grandeur of our masters, their contempt for God and men, for us men."

Today is a good day, though, as they need not worry so much about the cold and now find themselves thinking of their hunger instead: "If it was not for the hunger!," they think. Levi believes that this is human nature: one focuses on the most immediate source of unhappiness, and when that disappears one looks to the next most immediate source. With this perspective, one can never be completely unhappy, nor can one be completely happy.

Hunger is the very way of life in the camps, and the prisoners are "living hunger." Levi and his co-workers stop to watch a steam shovel seemingly gobble up mouthfuls of earth as it digs and deposits dirt. They cannot watch it without thinking of their own hunger. Sigi, a seventeen-year-old laborer, speaks of his mother's cooking back home in Vienna, which leads to Béla discussing the food he remembers from Hungary. Despite the torment of such thoughts, Levi remembers the spaghetti he ate the day before he was shipped north from an Italian sorting camp to Auschwitz. He agonizes over having

not finished the meal: "if we had only known!" The newest arrival in their work detail, Fischer, eats the portion of bread he saved from morning; the more experienced prisoners, who have been deprived of adequate food for much longer, cannot imagine saving any food for later. They even create justifications for their voracious habits, telling themselves that stale bread is not as nutritious as fresh bread, and that food eaten piecemeal is not digested as well.

Themes

Genocide

"A Good Day" takes place in the Auschwitz concentration camp during its final year of operation before being liberated at the end of World War II. While there had been many attempts to destroy entire ethnic or racial groups before World War II and have been several since, the Holocaust remains the most emblematic and terrible example of genocide in the popular imagination. The reason is that it was carried out through careful planning by the Nazi government of Germany, contributing a previously unseen breadth, efficiency, and coldblooded rationality to the goal of exterminating the Jews of Europe. As a prisoner of Auschwitz, Levi witnessed the daily horrors of Hitler's "Final Solution of the Jewish Question" and the dehumanizing effects it had on prisoners, causing them to become like animals in order to survive. As Jonathan Druker describes in "The Shadowed Violence of Culture: Fascism and the Figure of Ulysses in Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*," the very rational administration of Nazi Germany's irrational plans created a philosophical tension for intellectuals such as Levi. Druker highlights Levi's

memoir's embrace of scientific method and knowledge, as expressions of human dignity, and its rejection of the social Darwinism used to justify the creation of Auschwitz. The dilemma for the rational humanist is that Darwin's potent theory, a credit to the powers of the human mind, actually dethrones humans, transforming them into animals subject to exploitation and even natural selection.

In "A Good Day," Levi and his fellow prisoners take for granted that they will die in an extermination camp like Birkenau. They know that "the insane dream of grandeur of our masters" leaves no doubt that their fate is to become victims of genocide. Genocide is the terminal logic of those who wish to actively enforce a rule of "survival of the fittest" based on racial ideology. This was, in effect, what made the Holocaust—and especially camps such as Auschwitz—so horrifying. Nazi Germany not only promoted a mandate of racial mass murder, but did so with a system of rules and protocols that took into account the most efficient means to exterminate the Jews and other "undesirables" without acknowledging the humanity of those it destroyed. The Kapo uses the German word for "eating" (*fressen*) that refers to animals when talking about the prisoners, and Levi does not disagree. They are no longer humans in the camp, and when he compares the prisoners to the machinery at the Buna, he writes that while they are the only things that are alive there, the machines are more alive than the prisoners. Throughout *Survival at Auschwitz*, Levi returns time and again to the notion of "usefulness" as a way to avoid the selections by which prisoners were sent to the gas chambers. This was built into the very rationale of camps such as Auschwitz: as long as one could provide some kind of benefit to the camp or to the larger project of supporting the war, one could escape death and instead function as a laborer. In short, the only alternative to death in Auschwitz was slavery.

Class and Ethnicity

Just as in society outside the camp, a class system developed in Auschwitz based partially on ethnicity but also on seniority. The prisoners of the camp are known by the tattooed numbers on their arms. A higher number indicates a recent arrival and the likelihood that the prisoner is ignorant of camp ways. For example, when Fischer, the newest arrival in Levi's Kommando, saves part of his bread past breakfast to eat later, Levi notes that "none of us old ones are able to preserve our bread for an hour." There are various theories as to why that is, but most of the men agree that the safest place to keep bread from being stolen is in one's stomach. Further, blocks of numbers differentiate ethnic groups—Jews from non-Jews, as well as different nationalities of Jews—and Levi casually recounts the stereotypes for certain groups. He takes special note of the "Greeks, those admirable and terrible Jews of Salonica, tenacious, thieving, wise, ferocious and united, so determined to live, such pitiless opponents in the struggle for life." This is a vivid portrait of one of the hardiest groups in the camp, a description that balances negative connotations of opportunism with a positive struggle to live. The Greeks have been in the camp for three years, a nearly unheard-of tenure. It is worth noting that the only character who dares to imagine aloud a future outside of the camps is the Greek Felicio.

Such a class system was officially ratified in part by the Kapo system, first established in Dachau, where prisoners were given responsibility for fellow prisoners. Kapos were often Poles and political prisoners rather than foreign Jews. The Kapo has the ability to enforce rules, which Levi indicates was often done arbitrarily. For example, part of their "good day," after the promise of warmer weather and extra soup rations, is that "the Kapo feels no urge to hit us." These internal social systems gave a way for prisoners to differentiate those who could survive camp life and those who would perish quickly, what Levi calls "the drowned and the saved."

Another effective way to enforce racism and social hierarchy is to use language to make people of other races and ethnicities stand apart. German was the official language of the camps, which many of the prisoners did not speak, as they came from all over Europe. In "A Good Day," Levi recounts the casual way that *fressen*—the German term for how animals eat—replaces *essen*, the term for how humans eat. Levi himself accepts this term, thus acknowledging the debasement of his life as a camp prisoner and his lower status as a Jew in comparison to Germans.

The nature of the camps made language even more problematic: the wide range of ethnicities and nationalities meant that communication was often difficult. One not only needed to learn German, but also the languages of other ethnic groups present as well in order to work together. Levi refers to his work camp and their building of the Carbide Tower as a modern Tower of Babel. This speaks to the biblical story about how God punished an attempt to build a tower that reached Heaven, giving the people different languages so they could no longer communicate. The Carbide Tower is a monument to a very human evil, not to any god, but the curse of incomprehension remained the same for this act of hubris, "erected in defiance of heaven like a stone oath."

Resilience

Perhaps the most striking aspect of "A Good Day" is its emphasis on the positive: what Levi describes is a *good* day. He does not allow for absolutes in human emotion, but instead he finds that the unknown quality of any experience is what causes both grief and hope. In only focusing on the most immediate causes of one's emotional states, one is constantly surprised by the further complexities of the situation. This limited vision is not only the cause of man's basic discontent, but also a key to enduring in a place as sinister as Auschwitz—"our means of surviving in the camp." Levi argues that the inability to realize the "complex nature of the state of unhappiness" leads a person to discover that after the most immediate cause of suffering is removed, "you are grievously amazed to see that another one lies behind."

In this way, when the problem of cold weather seems solved by the coming of spring, it gives way to the problem of hunger, which is itself solved on this day. Without those two constant sources of unhappiness burdening their every thought, the prisoners are free to think about other things besides their survival. In this manner, the men are not happy, but they are able to enjoy the more mundane unhappiness experienced by free men—something they had not likely experienced since being taken away to Auschwitz. This does not mean Levi and his fellow prisoners accept their fate, but rather that hope is a crucial part of surviving such horrors. In its own way, being allowed to assume the mantle of unhappy free men is to struggle against the bleakness of their camp lives—not to openly acknowledge hope (something only the bold Greek Felicio dares), but to remember there is something beyond the Lager and that they were once a part of it.

Historical Context

World War Ii

Many issues have been considered as the cause of World War II (1939–1945). Among the most often cited include the treatment of Germany after World War I, as well as the rise of nationalism in aggressor countries Germany, Japan, and Italy (later known as the Axis Powers) and their desire for more territory. World War II began officially on September 9, 1939, with Germany's invasion of Poland. Until that point, countries such as Great Britain had been applying the policy of appeasement—attempting to settle disputes through compromise rather than military action—toward Germany as it appeared to be ramping up for war. The United States initially remained neutral, though close ties to Great Britain made America sympathetic to the Allied Forces, which also included the Soviet Union and France. The Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, brought the United States into the war on both the European and Pacific fronts, as Germany joined Japan in its declaration of war against America.

Levi's role in the war was tied specifically to his Italian nationality. When Italy's Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini was removed from power in 1943 after the Americans landed in Sicily, the new prime minister, Field Marshal Pietro Badoglio, negotiated a cease-fire with the Allies. However, German forces struck from the north, freed Mussolini, and split Italy in half: the south was protected by the Allies, but the north fell under Hitler's control. The majority of Italian Jews lived in the north. Many were placed in local internment camps, and some were shipped further north to concentration camps such as Auschwitz. Levi had sought to join the anti-Fascist partisans in 1943 but was caught and sent to Auschwitz.

The tide of the war turned on June 6, 1944, with the Allied invasion of Normandy, France. Caught by surprise, Hitler's forces were never able to fully recover. The sweeping Allied reclamation of Europe took a very personal form for Levi, as he was there when Auschwitz was liberated by Soviet forces on January 24, 1945. In April 1945, Soviet troops captured Berlin. On May 7, 1945, the Allies celebrated V-E (Victory in Europe) Day, which ended the war in Europe. Following the United States' devastating nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, in August 1945, victory on the Pacific front was finalized with Japan's surrender on September 2, 1945.

The Holocaust

Under Adolf Hitler, Germany's National Socialist regime, also known as the Nazi Party, emphasized the anti-Semitism prevalent in Germany as well as other parts of Europe in the 1930s and 1940s. The anti-Semitic riots on *Kristallnacht*—"The Night of Broken Glass," on November 9, 1938—is often considered the start of the Holocaust. From there, pogroms (officially encouraged massacres) took place that terrorized Jews; anti-Semitic laws stripped Jews of their rights; and ghettos were established where Jews

were forced to live. Germany at first claimed that the deportation of Jews from Germany was a "resettlement" project and suggested that Jews were to be shipped to the island of Madagascar. But as time passed, the pretenses dropped, and the ideological demand for racial purity and the presence of "undesirable" populations using valuable German resources made the "Jewish Problem" central to the Nazi agenda.

Initially, Jews were placed in internment camps, concentration camps, and slave labor camps. These were not death camps—whose specific aim was the mass extermination of the Jews—but were instead used for incarceration and forced labor. Because of unsanitary conditions, limited nutrition, and brutal work schedules, many prisoners died of starvation, disease, and exhaustion. In January 1942, the Wannsee Conference ratified what would be known as the "Final Solution," Hitler's plan to systematically exterminate all Jews in Europe. From then on, Jews were sent to extermination camps. Jews from across Nazi-controlled Europe were rounded up and transported, often in overflowing railroad cattle cars, to the camps. They were immediately divided by age, gender, and health. Those considered "unfit" were immediately shot or sent to the gas chamber. Those who survived the selection were stripped of all of their belongings—including gold fillings, eye glasses, wedding rings, and anything of value—and were given a tattoo on their forearm with an ID number. Living conditions were squalid. Prisoners were forced to share cramped sleeping quarters, often infested with lice and vermin. Food allotments for one day usually consisted of a slice of bread and a cup of thin soup. Many of the camps were located in areas of Poland that receive heavy winter snow, and prisoners were forced to work in brutally cold conditions without proper clothing in winter, as is illustrated in "A Good Day."

There were six known extermination camps in operation between 1941 and 1945: Belzec, Sobibor, Chelmno, Majdanek, Treblinka, and Auschwitz-Birkenau. Auschwitz began as a concentration camp like Dachau and Buchenwald, handling political prisoners and putting them to work to further German ends. It became an extermination camp with the addition of the Birkenau crematorium in 1943. More Jews were killed in Auschwitz than in any other extermination camp. As Laurence Rees observes in *Auschwitz: A New History*, Auschwitz became a model example of combining Germany's "twin goals of work and murder." The crematoria and gas chambers became the central focus of the camp. Prisoners were farmed out to nearby subcamps, and, as Rees writes, "when they were deemed no longer fit to work after months of appalling mistreatment, they could be transported a few miles to the extermination facilities of Auschwitz-Birkenau."

While the exact number killed during the Holocaust has never been definitive, popular estimates hold that roughly six million people were killed as a result of this monstrous policy. Much contemporary debate about the Holocaust has been centered on how much ordinary German citizens knew about the extermination of the Jews, and why they did nothing to stop it. Jews claim it was impossible that the Germans did not know what was going on, yet many Germans claim that they knew nothing of the slaughter being carried out in the camps.

Italian Jews

Jewish people have a long history in Italy, dating back to the Roman Empire. Their importance and contributions to many aspects of Italian culture had been recognized, though such recognition was also often tinged with racism and resentment. While anti-Semitism was quite common, it was worsened by decrees from Pope Innocent III at the start of the thirteenth century, paving the way for many more such anti-Semitic decrees from the Vatican that would persist for centuries. Despite such oppression, Italy was considered a relatively benevolent refuge for Jews, compared to other parts of Europe. As Primo Levi's biographer Ian Thomson points out in *Primo Levi: A Life*, "Like most northern Italian Jews, the Levis claimed descent from the Sephardim (after *Sefarad*, Hebrew for 'Spain') who had fled anti-Semitic Castile in the fifteenth century." The Levis were among many Jewish families who assimilated into Italian culture and played a role in the nation's development. In the early twentieth century, this included supporting the rise of Fascism and of Benito Mussolini. Thomson notes that most of the 130,000 Jews living in Italy in the 1920s supported Mussolini because "the Fascist Party seemed to endorse the Jews' patriotic, middle-class aspirations."

The ties between Mussolini's Italy and Hitler's Nazi Germany led to growing anti-Semitic feelings in Italy, with accusations from the Fascist party and the general Italian media exploding in 1937 and 1938. In September 1938, the Fascists began to implement racial laws, similar to those in Germany, with wide restrictions on the activities of Jewish people. After the armistice with the Allies in 1943, Italian Jews started being transported to camps in Poland and elsewhere.

Language and Bearing Witness

Survivors of the Holocaust fall roughly into two broad categories: those who cannot or will not speak of what happened to them, and those who are compelled to speak not only for themselves, but for those who no longer have a voice. The latter feel the need to bear witness to what happened, and are compelled, as Levi states in his preface, by the "need to tell our story to 'the rest,' to make 'the rest' participate in it." Language, therefore, is part of Levi's salvation. As Daniel R. Schwarz observes in *Imagining the Holocaust*, "In the camps, language had been reductive, destructive, and persecuting, but [Levi's] narrating and witnessing language has the capacity to be vital." In "Primo Levi and the Language of Witness," Michael Tager adds,

Levi's struggle to develop a style suitable to his material helps explain his fascination with language itself, both as a creator and reflection of our identities and politics…. Linguistic patterns disclose political concepts and relationships that enable him better to understand his experiences. Sensitivity to such patterns also helps him construct a powerful language for his witness.

Literary accounts of the Holocaust and the racial oppression of Nazi Germany began to appear shortly after the war, including *The Pianist* (1945) by Wladyslaw Szpilman (originally published as *Death of a City* in Poland), *The Diary of a Young Girl* (1947) by

Anne Frank, and *Night* (1958) by Elie Wiesel. In later years, survivors and descendants of both Germans and Jews began to weigh in on the Holocaust in both fiction and nonfiction. Notable books include *The Tin Drum* (1959) by Günter Grass; the collection *Auschwitz and After* (1965) by Charlotte Delbo; *The Painted Bird* (1965) by Jerzy Kosinski; *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* (1967) by Tadeusz Borowski; *The Shawl* (1980) by Cynthia Ozich; and *Schindler's List* (1982) by Thomas Keneally.

Critical Overview

When first published in Italy under the title *Se qesto e un uomo (If This Is a Man*, published in America as *Survival in Auschwitz*) in 1947, Levi's book received little attention from readers or critics. Sales were poor for the first printing of two thousand copies, six hundred of which were damaged by a warehouse flood. One of the concerns that initially dogged Levi was whether he was simply a witness to the Holocaust whose account had factual significance but little aesthetic merit, or whether he was indeed a writer of literary value. Levi did not see why the roles were mutually exclusive. At the time, only two reviewers paid special attention to Levi's unique accomplishment: Italo Calvino, himself a promising new writer at the time, and the critic Arrigo Cajumi. Biographer Ian Thomson, in *Primo Levi: A Life*, quotes Cajumi's *La Stampa* review of November 26, 1947, in which he calls Levi a "born writer" who "arrives naturally at art." According to Thomson, Cajumi was also the only critic at the time to pick up on the "survival of the fittest" undertone present in the book.

Many believed that it would take years, even decades, before people could face the horrors of the Holocaust and read such an unvarnished account of what took place. Later reactions to Elie Wiesel's original manuscript for *Night* seem to bear this out. Levi's own book was long forgotten by the Italian public when the author secured a contract for a new edition in 1955; that edition finally debuted in 1958, with significant changes made to the manuscript. The initial run was again two thousand copies, and it went through two reprints of the same size in the years that followed. The English version was first published in 1960 to strong critical praises but weak sales.

The success of *Survival in Auschwitz* was quite gradual, as recognition for Levi's other works led to greater recognition of his first major book. The immediate Italian success of *La Tregua (The Truce)* in 1963 boosted sales of *If This Is a Man. The Truce*—later re-titled *The Reawakening* in English—is the sequel to Levi's Auschwitz account, covering his trek back to Turin, Italy, after being liberated from Auschwitz.

With a subject as powerful and significant as the Holocaust, controversy is unavoidable. The very existence of the Holocaust has been called into question, and Levi was active in denouncing revisionists who denied the genocide or its universal human relevance. Other, narrower criticisms also surfaced. Thomson recounts that in 1985, author Fernanda Eberstadt took issue with the style of writing in *Survival in Auschwitz*, contending it "was marred by 'psuedo-scientific prose' and 'hackneyed social psychology'" and that this approach did not properly address the specific anti-Semitic aims of the Nazi's Final Solution. Levi responded personally to these points, as well as to more personal attacks by Eberstadt on whether his anti-Fascist activities were opportunistic in nature and reflected a lack of Jewish consciousness.

Modern critical assessments of Levi agree on his contribution to Holocaust literature. In Jonathan Druker's "The Shadowed Violence of Culture: Fascism and the Figure of Ulysses in Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*," he calls Levi an "indispensable author … one of the most authoritative, most cited Holocaust witnesses." In a *New York Times*

review of the stage production *Primo* titled "Crystallizing Legacy of Auschwitz Survivor," reviewer Ben Brantley calls *Survival in Auschwitz* "one of the essential books of the 20th century." One of the most common praises of Levi's work is how his combination of journalistic detail and aesthetic allusions combine to create a powerfully unique account of a uniquely powerful world event. In "Primo Levi—174517," George Jochnowitz calls *Survival in Auschwitz* "a lacerating book" that has a devastating impact "even though one knows about what happened at Auschwitz." Despite the horrors it recounts, Jochnowitz notes that the memoir is "written without expressing the anger and grief he felt. The book is awful fact after awful fact." A review of *Survival in Auschwitz; and, The Reawakening: Two Memoirs* by *Publishers Weekly* in 1985 calls *Survival in Auschwitz* "remarkable and truthful," and like Jochnowitz, notes that Levi writes "as witness rather than judge."

Levi's training as a chemist is a key part of his analytical perspective. This training has also made him aware of the wonder implicit in all human interaction, even at the worst of times. In *Imagining the Holocaust*, Daniel Schwarz suggests that Levi's books are among the most effective Holocaust literature because "they reveal his stance of presumed objectivity, which he attributes to his scientific temperament. Yet, he observes human behavior not as part of general rules but of wondrous particulars to be observed."

Levi's literary stature has grown over the years, ensuring that his memories of the Holocaust will remain valuable to future generations—an inspiring literary feat of historical witness.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

In the following excerpt, Boone stresses the struggle by Levi between the shame Holocaust survivors felt and the equally strong urge to pay witness to the events so that the rest of the world can properly recognize its significance.

Levi saw himself first and foremost as witness, and set about fulfilling his duty to write the story of Auschwitz on behalf of all those who perished (the true witnesses) and for those who survived and could not or would not tell. It is part of the pain of telling to recognize that the story must be reduced to what is hearable, that it must be simplified. Confusion may result if we do not remain aware that it is a reductive process which has its costs.

From the teller's side Levi knew the grievous distance between the experience of "down there" and its story. And as time went on he saw the gap widen between the world's perception of Auschwitz and its lived reality. The simplification which is merely and painfully essential in order to tell becomes abundant and convenient to the hearing. Levi felt our hearing was much too indulgent, readers took too many liberties in order "to understand."

Primo, a play based on *Survival at Auschwitz*, was adapted by Antony Sher and directed by Richard Wilson. It was staged at the Music Box Theater in New York City in the summer of 2005. A filmed version of the play is available on DVD through Kultur Films International.

A film adaptation of Levi's other autobiography, *The Reawakening*, was produced in 1997 under the title *The Truce*. Directed by Francesco Rosi, the film stars John Turturro as Primo Levi. It is available on DVD from Miramax.

In his "Afterword" to the combined edition of *Survival in Auschwitz* and *The Reawakening*, published in 1986, Levi turned from the goal of understanding altogether: "Perhaps one cannot, what is more one must not, understand what happened, because to understand is almost to justify…. If understanding is impossible, knowing is imperative, because what happened could happen again. Conscience can be seduced and obscured again—even our consciences." The date, 1986, is important. A year before his death and 40 years after Auschwitz, he was warning us about the seduction of power and prestige, about the oversimplification of inherently unpalatable facts in order to contain, and possibly disarm, their charge against us. He reviewed it for us chapter by chapter in *The Drowned and the Saved*. He was speaking to his readers—now, about our world and our prospects—now; although he refers back to the Lager, he "lingers more willingly on the state of affairs such as it is now." It is unnerving—his topic is the contemporary human situation and we are perilously close to the categories of Auschwitz. He is pointing "here," and reminding us of "down there." And if shame is a reigning theme in Levi's writing, the absence of shame in both of these realms is his greater concern.

In Levi's accounts, shame is the immediate response to a recognition of degraded humanity: he describes it on the faces of his liberators, a shame that the Germans never knew; and he describes it in the prisoner's transition to freedom. "Coming out of the darkness, one suffered because of the reacquired consciousness of having been diminished." Levi recognizes that for the prisoners, "on a rational plane, there should not have been much to be ashamed of, but shame persisted nevertheless." It was the failure of human solidarity—the "I do not know who my neighbor is …"—that produced the overwhelming sense of being "oppressed by shame." Forty years later, the burden of shame is still evident, expressed now by Levi in relation to Genesis 1:2: "the anguish inscribed in every one of the 'tohubohu' of a deserted and empty universe crushed under the spirit of God but from which the spirit of man is absent: not yet born or already extinguished."

As a chemist, Levi knew the value of catalysis and had a special fondness for the impurities in matter which give rise to reactions. In *The Periodic Table* he proudly declares: "I am the impurity that makes the zinc react." He was himself a catalyst to change, encouraging in his readers an awakened availability to enter into and undergo transformation. He did not want his witness to be a solitary, self-referential broadcast. And he acknowledges, first in *Survival in Auschwitz* and then elsewhere, the prisoners' fear that they would not be believed in the free world. This thwarted telling, the theme of regular nightmares, is juxtaposed, in *Survival in Auschwitz* to another dream, about the nearness and tangibility of food which at the very moment of tasting is forestalled: "every time a different circumstance intervenes to prevent the consummation of the act." It remains a question in some minds as to whether Levi considered his witness to be a consummated act, or one never quite fulfilled, and where exactly his readers might figure in that question.

His witness, in any event, was a call to awaken, perhaps never put harshly enough to his reader: "'Getup': the illusory barrier of the warm blankets, the thin amor of sleep, the nightly evasion with its very torments drops to pieces around us, and we find ourselves mercilessly awake, exposed to insult, atrociously naked and vulnerable."

Reveille in the camps brought prisoners face-to-face with their fragility and shame, and Levi's testimony becomes a verbal echo of that exposure. "Illusory barrier," "thin armor," and "nightly evasion" may also refer to the reader's post Holocaust defenses, and Levi wants to illuminate their flimsy nature. His witness ends with a vehemence that readers might have grasped as imperative from the first. "Wstawach"—"it happened, therefore it can happen again."

Source: Susan L. Boone, "Unvarnished Truth: The Chemistry of Shame in Primo Levi," in *Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought*, Vol. 48, No. 1, Winter 1999, p. 72.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently

studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

"Night." Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the "Criticism" subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on "Winesburg, Ohio." Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. "Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition," Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

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Adams, Timothy Dow. "Richard Wright: "Wearing the Mask," in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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