

An Interrupted Life: The Diaries of ETTY HILLESUM, 1941-1943 Study Guide

An Interrupted Life: The Diaries of ETTY HILLESUM, 1941-1943 by ETTY HILLESUM

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Plot Summary

Esther ("Etty") Hillesum is a young Jewish woman who lives with her family in the Dutch town of Deventer. Born in January, 1914 just before the beginning of World War I, Etty was the only daughter of Rebecca Hillesum-Bernstein and Louis Hillesum. Etty has two brothers, Jaap and Mischa. Mischa is a talented pianist and Jaap eventually becomes a medical doctor. Etty Hillesum's father was headmaster of a grammar school in Deventer where Etty spend the majority of her childhood and early adult life.

Etty was raised in an assimilated Jewish home. In other words, the Hillesums were not observant Jews. There is no mention of attending religious services outside the home. Also, from Etty's writings, one learns that no religious rituals were practiced in the home. Etty makes only a few references to religious practices in her diaries. Sometime during her 20s, Hillesum moves to Amsterdam. She shares a house with Han Wegerif, a 62-year-old widower. His son Hans (an economics student) lives in the house as well. Bernard (the "social democrat") and Maria Tuinzing, a nurse and Etty's best friend are, like Etty, paying boarders. Etty teaches Russian and does translation work to make a living after she completes a law degree.

Etty Hillesum's diaries begin on a Sunday in March, 1941. She initially undertakes the task of keeping a diary as a means of living a healthier, more conscientious inner life. She hopes to become a writer one day. In the beginning, Etty writes very much like a woman of her time. Etty, the daughter of an intellectual, is first and foremost a thinker. She is an avid reader, ever involved in philosophical discussions with her contemporaries. As a young adult living in the years between the first and second World Wars, Etty Hillesum was decidedly modern and independent. She was open to intimate emotional and sexual relationships with others. Etty chronicles her daily experiences and adventures in conversational entries. Etty works through the pain and glory of life on the pages of her diary.

Interestingly, Etty Hillesum's transformation is spiritual and non-religious. Yes, Etty does come to believe in and trust God—the word Etty uses for that higher, best part of herself. Over the course of the next two years, Hillesum addresses questions of life and death, sacrifice and acceptance. The account of her inner progression is nothing short of miraculous. Hillesum lived her life in Amsterdam with her eyes, heart, and mind wide open. There is a fearlessness about Etty Hillesum, the progression of which the audience is allowed to witness. The story Etty Hillesum tells is simultaneously personal and universal.



March 9, 1941 through April 30, 1942 (Pages 3 - 133)

March 9, 1941 through April 30, 1942 (Pages 3 - 133) Summary and Analysis

Esther ("Etty") Hillesum began writing a diary in early March of 1941. By that time, she was a twenty-seven-year-old single woman living in Amsterdam, making her way in the city. World War II had begun but for Hillesum and other Jews living in the Netherlands, things were about to take a turn for the worse. Before the war arrived on her doorstep, however, Etty Hillesum's main concern was her internal life both from an emotional standpoint and an intellectual one. Putting everything on paper satisfied two of Etty's most innermost desires. Primarily, Hillesum sought to purge herself of what she considered to be immaturity and complacency. It seems that Etty Hillesum was determined to grow mentally, emotionally and spiritually. In addition, Etty Hillesum had devoted herself to honing her craft: writing. Like Rainer Maria Rilke, her favorite author, Etty wanted to be able to write in such a way that moved, startled, interested and inspired her (potential) readers.

Etty Hillesum's diary begins on Sunday, March 9, 1941. She admits certain weaknesses, mostly having to do with her appetites. Etty also discloses that her internal life is more important than her external life. The diary begins as a way for Etty to work through her feelings. Etty's day-to-day life centers around her work as a Russian teacher; she has several paying clients whom she mentions by way of description. Hillesum lives in a house owned by a widower named Han Wegerif. Wegerif is substantially older than Etty. Nevertheless, the two become intimately involved. Wegerif's age does not concern Etty and she finds Han to be loving and very gentle. This is important to Etty, who admits that she is more the kind of person who wears her heart on her sleeve, so to speak.

Hillesum first meets Julius Spier (sometimes simply referred to as "S" in the diary) in February of 1941. Spier is a psychoanalyst who specializes in chiromancy, commonly known as reading and studying palms. Spier's insights on chiromancy and psychology came as the result of his own work with Carl Gustav Jung, the founder of analytical psychology. It was Jung who encouraged Julius Spier to go into chiromantic practice and take on clients. Early in her writings, Etty says that she finds "S" intriguing and she is impressed with his sensuality and power. As part of her therapy, Etty and Spier engage in a kind of wrestling, intended to relieve her stress and aggression. However, aside from being solely therapeutic, it awakens feelings in Etty of a sexual nature. She acknowledges her attraction to Spier.

Each day, Etty's writings speak of her need to gain control over herself and what she considers to be her fleshly desires. She begins each day full of resolve to become a better, more skilled writer. Etty also expresses wanting to deal with life in a more direct,



adult manner. On page 11 Hillesum says, "Everything will have to become more straightforward," and that "creating some sort of clarity through [her] work for others [is] really what it's all about." This statement is an unmistakable foreshadowing of what eventually happens in Etty Hillesum's life.

Around this time also, Etty addresses the question of hatred. Specifically, she talks about hatred of the Germans for their persecution of the Jews. Hillesum declares to herself (and to the reader) that "if there were only one decent German, then he should be cherished despite that whole barbaric gang" (11). From this entry it is clear that as early as March 15, 1941, Etty Hillesum had already grown substantially in her understanding of the situation at hand. She realizes that it would be unfair as well as counterproductive to return the Germans' hatred with hatred of her own. This conscious refusal to blame an entire group of people for the heinous misdeeds of a select few was not necessarily the consensus among Jews at the time. It is almost certain that Etty's contemporaries must have (at one time or another) wondered how she could maintain such compassion for her oppressors. Following this, Hillesum writes that she tried to keep the peace in the house. There were several people living in Wegerif's home at the time. Much of the discomfort among them stemmed from people's mistrust of the German cook, Käthe. Although Hillesum does not go into specific detail, one can imagine the discussions, maybe even arguments that took place in Wegerif's home.

Returning to thoughts and observations related to her inner life, Etty admits that she is guilty of greed. She sees it as a kind of selfish grasping born out of an immature attachment to people, places, and things. Etty admonishes herself to let go of things outside of herself. At this point Etty Hillesum's spiritual growth becomes her main focus and the diary takes a decidedly introspective turn. She talks about the importance of living in the present. To this end, Etty voices her commitment to doing some personal spiritual housecleaning (27). She engages herself in a discussion of the soul as the predominant force in an individual's life. Basically, Hillesum is a seeker; someone who is actively involved in examining the world and her perceptions thereof from the inside out rather than the other way around. Even before reaching Westerbork, Etty Hillesum's soul emerges as something independent and infinitely more powerful than her physical self.

Conversely, Etty also engages in some discussion of the wrestling that she does with "S." She feels a certain amount of resentment toward "S," which she does not explain specifically. Rather, Hillesum refers to a feeling of ambivalence toward men as something worthy of resolution. She remarks that her lovers have all felt like strangers. The emptiness which Hillesum experiences when involved in intimate relationships speaks to the void that she later admits is her soul's longing for completion through mercy, grace and the love of God.

Steeped once again in her own humanness, Hillesum writes that on Sunday, June 14, 1941 the German government begins to round up and "centralize" the Dutch Jews. "Centralize" is the word used by the Germans to refer to the process by which large numbers of Jews were captured from their homes and off the streets and then put into ghettos or camps. Shortly thereafter, Hillesum finds herself coming out of a mild



depression. It is at this point that Etty Hillesum identifies her loneliness as a deep well that can only be filled by the presence of what she chooses to call God (44).

By September of 1941, it becomes clear from her diary entries that Etty Hillesum has begun to change significantly and radically. Although she may not realize it at this point, Etty's most important discovery is that she is not the center of the universe. She becomes acutely aware of the individual's responsibility to engage in rigorous self-examination and to make internal changes which meet a higher need. Here, the individual self comes to recognize its accountability to the greater society of all people.

Approximately one month later, Etty Hillesum entreats herself to allow life to embrace her rather than the opposite. She returns to a sincere desire to pay more attention to her inner life as a way of bringing about external change. Also, Hillesum continues to interrogate questions of normalcy. Marriage comes up in her written discussion with herself. She admits not being interested in marriage. This stands to reason, given the fact of the stress of German occupation and the uncertainties of Etty's life and the lives of others. The climate was one of extreme duress for the majority of Dutch citizens at the time. Given the precarious nature of Etty's existence, it is not unusual that she insists on staying in the moment as best she can. The present moment became the most important moment. At a time when Jews and non-Jews alike could be taken from their homes and separated from friends and loved ones at any given time, the present was a commodity as precious as gold.

Despite the fear and anxiety surrounding her at the time, Etty Hillesum continued her self-examination on paper, coming to terms with an attachment to what she refers to as "Western notions of the good life" (57). Conversely, she experiences a problem with overeating which she attributes to her greed to consume life and to know everything. The grasping behavior of overeating reminds Etty of her mother, Rebecca, whose greed Etty seems to have inherited. Etty is convinced that her mother's grasping comes from a deep-seated fear of lack or missing out on something. Etty does not have a strong relationship with her mother. Similarly, she somewhat wistfully admits that she and Jaap, her older brother, do not communicate well either. Hillesum says, "[...] I don't think we understand each other" (57). In addition, Etty's relationship with her father is also somewhat strained. Because of the lack of connection in her familial relationships, Etty decides to work her way through her negative feelings in hopes of coming to a place of acceptance and forgiveness, especially where her parents are concerned.

More than once, Etty Hillesum admits ignoring her own needs in favor of meeting the needs of others. The experience of suppressing her personal needs eventually leads Hillesum down the path of physical isolation and often results in illness of one sort or another. Interestingly, Hillesum uses the words "ascetic" and "asceticism" on numerous occasions throughout these writings. This is evidence that Hillesum was drawn to a life of self-denial long before gaining an awareness of her true motivation in life. Etty's eating problem, on the other hand, serves as a symbol of her materialism. During times of overindulgence, Hillesum's desire to know and absorb everything finds its externalization in compulsive activities such as eating and drinking too much. Ingesting



is one way of taking life in: tasting it, swallowing it and carrying it around inside oneself until it is digested and then released. For Etty Hillesum, this is the way life should be.

Whereas there is certainly a part of Etty Hillesum which would prefer to devote itself to solitary prayer and contemplation, she nonetheless comes to a realization that in order to find God, one must step out into the world and search for God "among people" (63). To reinforce her faith, Etty begins reading the Bible during her times of quiet meditation.

Resuming her discussion of the details of her daily life and relationships, Etty again addresses her grasping as a thing which no longer controls her. She refers once again to Julius Spier; this time in reference to Spier's fiancée, Herthe Levi, and Spier's twenty-two year old daughter. It is clear from the entry on page 75 that Etty believes women are too available to Spier. Given what Etty says about his forceful personality, this is not surprising. Still, she does feel a certain amount of discomfort knowing that his daughter is not so much younger than herself. Etty no longer considers herself to be under Spier's sway and she gives voice to wanting to "yield [herself] up to God" (76). Interestingly, at this point, Etty is still intimately involved with Han Wegerif. However, there are still moments when Etty laments Julius Spier's determination to remain faithful to Herthe Levi even though she is living in London at the time.

Etty returns to the subject of Rebecca and Louis, her parents, and her stay with them on New Year's Eve, 1941. She is with them in Deventer and it is at this point that she fully begins to understand her mother's greed where food is concerned. To Mrs. Hillesum, food means love. Etty's compassion for her mother and father increases and the compassion gives way to a deeper knowing on Etty's part. She comes to comprehend that her parents didn't teach her much because they hadn't learned much from their parents. Later, Etty talks about the utility of her sadness. She refers to her sadness as a point of departure that leads her to more profound appreciation of the individual's relationship with the world around her.

In February of 1942, several professors and other acquaintances of Etty's are sent to Veluwe as prisoners of the Nazis. On page 86, Hillesum makes a distinction between evil people and evil behaviors. Etty goes on to observe that structures which people construct for their own protection (their own good) can also collapse "and bury [them]." In this case, the structures to which Etty is referring are those political, social, and perhaps even moral rules and guidelines put in place to serve people which then backfire, causing more harm than good. Eerily, Hillesum recounts an incident during which a young Gestapo officer yells at her. She talks about being devoid of indignation for the young man—her compassion for the person outweighs the significance of his brutality toward her. Etty says she would have liked to have a conversation with the Gestapo officer about his childhood and other things that may have contributed to the way he was. "I should have liked to start treating him there and then, for I know that pitiful young men like that are dangerous as soon as they are let loose on mankind," she writes. Strangely enough, Hillesum's words foreshadow a great many situations taking place decades later in which young men wreaked some form of havoc on society. Oddly enough, her statement applies to the rash of school shootings in the United States during the 1980s and 1990s.



Etty's claim that, "Life is going to be very hard," is another foreshadowing of what awaits her later the year (88). She claims that the results of her rigorous efforts at self-examination serve to validate the necessity for Etty to shift her focus from the physical (temporal) realm to the spiritual realm. For Etty, the shift from physical to spiritual is a natural step on her individual progression. Etty also acknowledges the loneliness that is inherent in all human beings. This insight precedes Etty's consciousness of the inevitable outcome of her situation. At one point, she writes about hearing planes, machine gun fire and explosions outside her window.

By this time, Etty has come to fully accept life as a series of unfoldings. She advocates letting settle into the mind and heart and begins to view personal (inner) growth as an "organic process" in that it requires constant change; constant shifting of the emotional landscape (102). Her faith is represented as more fervent, as Etty writes of frequently wanting to kneel wherever she happens to be, head bowed in gratitude to God. It is also at this juncture that Hillesum confesses to her understanding of prayer and communion with God as intensely intimate experiences.

On April 2, 1942, Etty admits to being in love with Julius Spier. By this time, however, her perception of the chirologist has deepened considerably. Being well aware of Spier's appeal to women, she is able to release her feelings of jealousy concerning Spier's engagement to Herthe. Nevertheless, Etty is convinced that somehow Spier is her destiny and that they are somehow bound to experience life and learning together. Etty idealizes her relationship with Spier. She views him as being more intellectually, emotionally, and sexually mature than herself. Etty declares that she "ripens" when she is with Spier. She ties this ripening into her awakening to an authentic self. Etty sees her relationship with Spier as full of potential for further growth and expansion.

The German occupation force becomes more of a presence for Etty. She feels a good deal of anxiety and she begins to pray more fervently for deliverance. Paradoxically, Etty notices that detachment leads to a deepening love for others; especially in her relationship with her parents.

Han Wegerif and Julius Spier consume a good deal of Etty's emotional energy. She is almost nonchalant when she writes of her relationship with Han.

On April 17, 1942, Etty claims to be more conscious of her own vanity and a tendency to want to show off in front of others. Having spent a few days in the company of both Han Wegerif and Julius Spier, Etty blithely reminds herself not to make too much out of her experiences with the two men. On page 126, Hillesum reflects on the transience of her relationship with Spier. Eventually, she says, Spier will "release" her into an experience that is all her own. For the time being, Etty decides that she will go with Spier no matter where he goes as his "pretend" wife. She recommits herself to the craft of writing. However, in a moment of stark realism, Etty confesses knowing that she has no future as a professional writer.

Still relatively comfortable in mid-1942, Etty talks about the times ahead and the challenges she and other Jews will face now that they are required to wear a yellow



Star of David pinned to their chest. Knowing that things are bound to worsen, Etty nonetheless expresses her appreciation for the small comforts that are still allowed. Subsequently, she talks about the difference between genuine moral indignation and "petty personal hatred" (130). The moral indignation to which she refers has a global component, which supersedes the feelings of singular individuals. In light of what Hillesum knew about the wholesale extermination of the Jews, her statements prove that by this time she has reached a state of near transcendence. No longer concerned with questions of "us" and "them," Hillesum's remarks place the discussion in the higher realm of universal right and wrong.



May 18, 1942 through October 12, 1942 (Pages 133 - 231)

May 18, 1942 through October 12, 1942 (Pages 133 - 231) Summary and Analysis

On page 135, Etty refuses to allow her faith in God to lapse at such a time of terror and abject fear. She praises God at all times and comes to love the world at large and the beauty she sees outside her window and in her relationships. More importantly, Hillesum refuses to blame God for allowing the atrocities against the Jews (and all of humanity) to continue. At the same time, however, Etty feels guilt about living so abundantly while others are forced to make due with considerably less. On page 139, Etty begins preparing herself for life in a very small cell. Given the young woman's propensity toward the ascetic life, there may have been something rather appealing about this mental exercise.

Etty is well aware of the threat that the Germans pose. She is cognizant of her vulnerability as a Jew but she remains stalwart in her refusal to take a negative view of life. Etty continues to insist that life is valuable and beautiful. Etty subsequently learns that Jews in Deventer are no longer allowed to own bicycles. It is at this time that Etty realizes that she and Spier may have no future because of the war. Etty rises above her bitterness about the truth of the Jews' plight in Holland. On page 161, Etty reaches a place of being unwilling to put up a front for the benefit of others. She no longer concerns herself with the need to appear strong on the outside. It serves humanity better to allow a persecutor to witness another's "sadness and utter defenselessness."

It is clear that by May of 1942 Etty has learned to release her expectations and personal demands. Since she lives in non-Jewish household, Etty knows that it is simply a matter of time before she is apprehended and transferred to a camp of some sort. She declares, "Death is a gentle slipping away" (166). Etty's faith in God has grown exponentially. This is somewhat off-putting to her at first, but the change in her perspective is welcome. Etty feels it is necessary to purge her personality of everything possible which does not support her new way of being in the world. She is hyper-alert, hyper-conscious of what is taking place all around her. As she writes, "Ultimately, what matters most is to bear the pain to cope with it, and to keep a small corner of one's soul unsullied, come what may" (172). Her devotion to the higher purpose of carrying out God's will and design for her life becomes more solid.

Etty later grasps the magnitude of her choice not to go into hiding or attempt to "save" herself in any way. She finally has a glimpse of her place in the larger historical picture. She accepts her own feeling of bearing a burden, but she refuses to buckle under the weight of strong emotion. Her reliance is completely on God. "[On July 15], 1942, Etty secures a position in the Cultural Affairs Department of the Jewish Council" (184). Approximately one week later, Etty Hillesum volunteers to be deported to Westerbork.



She comes to accept and value her role as witness, thereby obligating herself to the preservation and dissemination of her thoughts, feelings, and obligations. Hillesum decides that she would rather not marry Julius Spier after all, citing the difference in their ages as a primary reason. Additionally, Etty's motivations have become unambiguously altruistic; preferring to "be there for everyone" rather than marry, which would limit her accessibility (195).

Julius Spier dies of natural causes in September of 1942 while Etty is in Amsterdam on leave from her duties at Westerbork. Etty herself is ill at this point. In order to give herself a sense of completion with their relationship, she writes "S" a long letter. After Spier's death, Etty's level of empathy rises. She reminds herself to channel her urges into some more far-reaching acts in service to the community of mankind (208). On page 215, Etty admits to her friend Ru that an unshakable faith in God is the main strength of her life. This act of verbalizing her faith to another person is revelatory for Etty as she interprets speaking about her faith as an act of freedom.

Etty further addresses the concept of suffering and the utility of personal and communal participation in suffering without preconception. That is to say, she deals with the idea of willingly, fearlessly bearing one's own burdens and the burdens of those in one's community. Hillesum resigns herself to the fact of viewing her commitment to life as somehow contributing to the lives of others.



Letters from Westerbork (Pages 235 - 365)

Letters from Westerbork (Pages 235 - 365) Summary and Analysis

This section is comprised of personal letters written by Etty Hillesum during her internment at Westerbork. The letters themselves differ from Etty diary entries in that they primarily address the desperation and immediacy of life in a concentration camp. Thousands of men, women, and children are interned at Westerbork; the area of which totals only one-half square kilometer. Sickness at the camp was rampant and Etty spent a good deal of time being ill while continuing her work for the Jewish Council there. Also, the letters chronicle the last few months of Etty's journey toward her inevitable death at the hands of the Germans.

Hillesum arrives at Westerbork in the summer of 1942. In a letter to the sisters of Dr. Herbert Kruskal, Etty describes in some detail the conditions under which she and the other imprisoned Jews live. Upon her arrival at the camp, Etty tells the sisters of the people she has met. It turns out that the Jews being sent to the transit camp are from all different parts of the world. The conversations Etty has with the others at Westerbork give her a clearer idea of what the Jews experienced during the past ten years. She admits, also, to being somewhat overwhelmed. Once again, Hillesum asserts the viewpoint that regardless of circumstance, people must remain open to new insights and new avenues of spiritual evolution. Continuing her description of life at Westerbork, Etty's thoughts turn to the elderly. Many of the older people living in the camp are extremely frail and she discovers that the majority of them are confused and frightened. Displaced from their homes and familiar neighborhoods, these older camp citizens experience a feeling of overwhelm which often pushes them to the breaking point.

Etty notices that people have a way of unraveling psychologically that leaves her somewhat ambivalent and yet deeply affected at the same time. The Jews being held at Westerbork live in huts or barracks. Those living in huts have it somewhat easier than their barracks counterparts. Huts offer more privacy whereas in the barracks, people sleep in bunk beds stacked three-high. There are no mattresses to sleep on, only planks or naked box springs. Blankets are also in short supply. Even though the camp is severely over-crowded and all of the housing units look the same, evidence of life varies from barracks to barracks. Etty remarks that some barracks can make one feel as though one were visiting a slum while another could give the impression of warmth and relative comfort.

On page 255, Etty Hillesum references Paul's first letter to the Corinthians which deals with love and maturity. The Bible verse which ends with, "And the greatest of these is love," is one of the most famous and most often quoted verses of all time. At the end of her letter to Kruskal's sisters, Etty's tone is less than optimistic. She reveals further



details of severe camp shortages and painful recollections of the regular prisoner transports leaving each day; carrying hundreds of Jews to extermination camps such as (the now-infamous) Auschwitz-Birkenau located in Poland.

Max ("Osias") Kormann was a close friend of Etty Hillesum and the recipient of many of her letters. Kormann met Hillesum at Westerbork and the two formed a bond which lasted until Etty's death. At one point, Etty writes to Kormann (whom she affectionately refers to as Osias) from Amsterdam where she is on leave. Because of her position with the Jewish Council, she is permitted to take furloughs. While in Amsterdam, Etty is able to visit friends and replenish her strength. In one of a series of letters to Kormann at Westerbork, Etty tells her friend that her flesh seems incapable of keeping up with the demands of living and working at a concentration camp. In an act of sheer strength of will, Etty manages to re-frame her perception of death at the hands of the Nazis. Unlike many other Jews in the same situation, Hillesum holds fast to the belief that her life (even though she knows will probably end soon) is a time of significant beginnings and she claims this thought as her one reality. Before closing this particular letter, Etty marvels at the strangeness of it all.

In May of 1943, Etty finds herself in Amsterdam for an extended period of time because she is too ill to make the trip back to Westerbork. Oddly, Etty tells Kormann how much she misses Westerbork and the work she does there. Subsequently, Etty volunteers to replace Jewish Council members who are on leave. She finally returns to Westerbork on Monday, June 7, 1943. In another letter (this one to her good friend Maria Tuinzing), Etty talks about sharing living quarters with several other women, one of whom is "a former beauty queen" (prostitute) from the red-light district in Amsterdam. Because of a shortage of beds, Etty must share a bed with a woman from Lijnsbaansgracht.

At Westerbork, it is Etty's job to assist women and children with their transport preparations. Etty is the last person from the Jewish Council many of them interact with. On one occasion, Etty meets friends of her parents who, before arriving at Westerbork, lived very comfortably as middle-class citizens of Amsterdam. At the concentration camp, however, there is no distinction made between one social class and another and past status becomes meaningless as they all become Jewish prisoners whose lives become the property of the Nazis in charge. In a letter to her friends (Han Wegerif, Maria Tuinzing and the others), Etty sits in a corner of a heath on the edge of the camp. She watches a young German soldier, one of the camp guards, picking a bouquet of purple lupins. At that same moment, three thousand Jews are being transported out of Westerbork, bound for the extermination camps. This is the first time Etty mentions "mass murder" (274).

On June 21, 1943 Etty's parents, Rebecca and Louis Hillesum, arrive at Westerbork. With them is Etty's brother Mischa. In a letter to her friend Milli Ortmann, Etty's tone is somewhat subdued. It can be surmised that the arrival of almost her entire family at the transit camp finally brings home to Etty the reality of her situation and that of the other Jewish prisoners: there is no escape, death is imminent. It is only a matter of time, Etty knows, before she herself will board a train and leave the Netherlands. People who are scheduled for transport are given little notice. They are expected to be ready to leave at



any time. The transience of life is symbolized by the trains which come and go each day, like clockwork. In actuality, Etty is not looking forward to sharing this part of the hardship with her parents and brother. Once again, she entreats Milli to push forward with Mischa's application to be allowed to go to Barneveld. Barneveld is a special type of camp intended to house creative people: Jewish musician, artists and intellectuals. In reality the "camp" is a castle and as such is immeasurably more comfortable than the average internment facility. Etty declares: "Suddenly, it's all coming to an end" (275). This simple statement proves that Hillesum was preparing herself mentally for the eventuality of extermination.

Etty's close friend Jopie Vleeschhouwer writes to Han Wegerif and the others in Amsterdam of the Hillesum's last day at Westerbork. Mischa's application for transfer to Barneveld had been denied. He was scheduled for transport. No one could understand why Mischa had been turned down. Perhaps it was because of his request that Rebecca and Louis Hillesum be allowed to join their son at Barneveld. No one could be sure how it all went so wrong so quickly. Consequently, Etty's parents were also slated for transport to another camp. Having resigned herself to traveling without her parents and brother, Etty was quite surprised to learn that she was also scheduled for transport. On September 7, 1943 Etty Hillesum, her mother and father and her brother Mischa were transported from Westerbork to Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland.

Etty Hillesum died at Auschwitz on November 30, 1943. She was 29 years old.



Characters

Rebecca Hillesum

Etty's mother. A homemaker, Rebecca Hillesum and her daughter had a somewhat strained relationship. In the beginning, Etty expresses her displeasure with her mother. By the end of *Letters from Westerbork*, however, Etty's attitude toward her mother is completely transformed. Rebecca Hillesum is a rather high-strung woman. It is obvious that prior to volunteering to go to Westerbork, Etty neither knows nor understands her mother very well. One thing Etty fully understands, though, is that the greed which her mother exhibits is the same greed which presents itself in Etty. There is, in her greed, a grasping quality which surprises and disappoints Etty when she examines it closely. The tendency to cling to people, places, and things for validation is a primary motivating factor in Etty's decision to change herself from the inside out. At Westerbork, Rebecca Hillesum becomes, for her only daughter, a sympathetic, caring woman whose best life begins in captivity. Etty comes to the realization that her mother never truly showed her the kind of love she yearned for because Rebecca Hillesum was unable to do so. Once Etty releases the resentment and judgment she feels toward Rebecca, the freer Etty becomes to love her mother and herself.

Louis Hillesum

Etty's father, Louis Hillesum, was a teacher of classical languages (most likely Latin and Greek) and a grammar school administrator. His most recent position was that of headmaster of the Stedelijk Gymnasium in Deventer. While incarcerated at Westerbork, Etty's father continued to give Greek and Latin lessons to several young Jewish men living at the camp. Not much is said about Louis Hillesum in Etty's diaries. However, one can deduce that it was her father's intellectual bent which Etty inherited. Etty Hillesum's father was headmaster of a grammar school in Deventer where Etty spent the majority of her childhood and early adult life. He raised Etty in an assimilated Jewish home. In other words, the Hillesums were not observant Jews.

Julius Spier

Julius Spier (alternately known as "S" and "Jul") was a chirologist and psychoanalyst who treated Etty Hillesum. Spier was a man who had great appeal to women. Etty considered him extremely attractive even though he was noticeably overweight and wore dentures. As part of his therapeutic practice, Spier would "wrestle" with his clients on the floor as a means of releasing the client's pent-up aggression and unspent nervous energy. When he met Etty Hillesum, Julius Spier was engaged to Herta Levi who lived in London and whom Etty had never met. Etty Hillesum and Julius Spier were lovers for a time and at one point Etty made the decision to go with Spier anywhere he might happen to go as a sort of pretend wife. The reality of the war prevented Etty from



carrying out her plan. Eventually, she decided against pursuing a deeper relationship with Spier, preferring instead to volunteer to work for the Jewish Council at Westerbork. Spier died in 1942 of natural causes. He and Hertha Levi were never married.

Max Osias Kormann

Max Kormann was a close friend of Etty Hillesum. The two met after Etty arrived at Westerbork. At one time, Kormann had worked as a traveling shoe salesman. Kormann, who was known as Max up until the time of his capture by the Germans in October of 1938, became Osias, a name which Etty used affectionately. Kormann was one of the refugees who sailed for Cuba on the SS St. Louis. He was eventually sent to the Netherlands for internment. At Westerbork, Kormann gave Jewish history and ritual lessons to the other prisoners at the camp school. Kormann survived the war and joined his family in the United States in 1946. He died in 1962. The majority of Etty Hillesum's letters were written to Osias Kormann while she was in Amsterdam.

Mischa Hillesum

Mischa Hillesum, like his brother and sister, is a brilliant and creative young man. Mischa gains some notoriety before the war because of his talent as a pianist. Mischa often performs on the radio and gives concerts and recitals all over the Netherlands. Because of his talent as a pianist, Mischa qualifies for internment at Barneveld, a special facility for gifted and talented Dutch Jews. As part of his application, Mischa requests that his parents, Rebecca and Louis Hillesum, be allowed to go to Barneveld as well. Mischa's request to be allowed to go to Barneveld is denied. Mischa Hillesum was put to death at Auschwitz in 1943.

Jaap Hillesum

Etty's older brother Jaap was a studious young man with a history of emotional disturbance. Jaap and Etty never really understood one another. Jaap Hillesum became a doctor and worked for a time at the Nederlands-Israëlitisch Ziekenhuis (Netherlands-Israelite Hospital). Unlike the other members of his immediate family, Jaap Hillesum died after being released from the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp sometime in 1944.

Maria Tuinzing

Maria Tuinzing was a nurse and a close friend of Etty Hillesum. Tuinzing also lived in the Wegerif house on the Gabriel Metustraat in Amsterdam where Etty resided for several years. Etty gave her diaries to Maria Tuinzing just before returning to Westerbork for the last time. Tuinzing, in turn, passed Etty's journals on to Klaas Smelik and his daughter Jopie (Johanna).



Han Wegerif

Etty's landlord in the house on the Gabriel Metustraart in Amsterdam. Etty and "Papa Han" (as she lovingly called him) were lovers for the duration of her time in Amsterdam. Wegerif was considerably older than Etty but she not intimidated by this fact. Actually, there are several points in her diary where Etty speaks about how comfortable their relationship is and how grateful she is for the level of familiarity she and Wegerif enjoyed.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Well-known German poet and intellectual. Etty Hillesum was especially drawn to his work and references to Rilke appear quite frequently in Hillesum's writings.

Dr. Herbert Kruskal

Herbert Kruskal was a medical doctor and an acquaintance of Etty Hillesum. The first of Etty's letters from the camp at Westerbork was addressed to Dr. Kruskal's sisters. Kruskal had asked Etty to write to his sisters, giving them her impressions of life at the transit camp.

Jopie Smelik

Description



Objects/Places

Deventer

Deventer is the town where Etty Hillesum lived with her family until she was in her twenties.

Westerbork

Built by the Dutch Ministry of Justice in 1939 to house German refugees who had fled to the Netherlands. In 1942, German authorities assumed control of Westerbork and turned it into a concentration camp ("Durchgangslager"). Jewish men, women, and children held at Westerbork were most often transported to other camps for extermination. Westerbork and the town for which it was named are located in the northeastern Dutch province of Drenthe.

Amsterdam

Amsterdam is a large city in the Netherlands. When Etty's diary begins, she is living in Amsterdam.

Silesia

A region in Poland.

Cultura

A bookstore that specialized in Communist literature.

Ellecom

Site of a training center for the Dutch SS. The 150 or so Jewish prisoners used to build the new sports fields at Ellecom were later transported to Westerbork.

The SS St. Louis

In 1939, the SS St. Louis sailed for Cuba carrying approximately one thousand Jewish refugees. Cuba refused to accept the refugees. The St. Louis eventually arrived in Antwerp, Belgium where some two hundred of the passengers were permitted to remain. The other refugees were sent to England, France, and the Netherlands.



Theresienstadt

A concentration camp run by the Nazis in World War II.

Hat Leven

The name of the red-light (prostitution) district in Amsterdam.

The Green Police

The special German police force used to round up Jews.

Auschwitz

A concentration and extermination camp located in Poland. Etty Hillesum, her parents, and her brother Mischa all died at Auschwitz.

The Herengracht

The Herengracht is a fashionable street in Amsterdam.

Limburg

A province in the Netherlands.

The Book of Hours (Stundenbuch)

A work by Rainer Maria Rilke, Etty Hillesum's favorite author.

Veluwe

A heavily wooded part of Holland.

The Nuremberg Laws

A set of antisemitic laws instituted by the Nazis which limited the freedom and mobility of Jewish people.

Drenthe

A province located in the Netherlands. The town of Westerbork and the concentration camp of the same name are located in this province.

Themes

Hope

One overriding theme in Hillesum's diaries is the idea of hope. When Hillesum began writing, it was out of a sense of hope for the development and cultivation of her own self-knowledge. Hillesum believed that getting her thoughts, feelings, and observations down on paper would help her to understand herself and contribute to her emotional growth and intellectual acumen. As time passed, however, and the horrors of what was happening around her began to become more and more real, Hillesum turned her focus further inward in the hope of gaining some sort of transcendent understanding of it all. In other words, Etty Hillesum was more concerned with living fully and richly even in a time of war and social trauma for Jews such as herself.

Her faith deepens over the course of the diaries and Hillesum eventually reached a place of resignation. By choosing to go to Westerbork, Hillesum's hope was again transformed. In the concentration camp, Hillesum hoped to give solace and companionship to the others around her. Her hope at Westerbork became the altruistic kind of hope for humanity that mystics and martyrs are known for. Hillesum's heart opened to her destiny. That is to say, she welcomed the opportunity to sacrifice herself in hopes that her presence and the comfort and compassion she provides would somehow assist those who were doomed to a similar fate. Finally, Hillesum's hope for a deeper, more meaningful life experience is what proved to be most challenging when she was faced with the prospect of dying at the hands of the Nazis.

Sacrifice

Sacrifice was not originally what Etty Hillesum planned on. However, as she grew spiritually, it occurred to the young Etty Hillesum that sacrifice, rather than going into hiding or joining a resistance movement would be a way for her to live a deeper, less self-absorbed life. Her choice to go to Westerbork voluntarily is astounding and difficult to understand. She never uses the word sacrifice in any of her writings, and yet the concept is what provides the underpinning of what would become the focus of her adult life: serving others in whatever ways possible. Interestingly, the idea of giving her life in service of others was not something Etty Hillesum had ever seen modeled in her own home. Not much is mentioned about her upbringing, but it is clear that Etty's emotional and spiritual trajectories were self-initiated. That is to say, the ideas by which she lived her life were the product of self-reflection and a deep need to find some purpose in life; something beyond a career or marriage and children. Etty Hillesum's sacrifice of her temporal life is balanced by the diaries and letters that remained after she died. Giving became the most important thing Etty could think of to do.



Redemption

The matter of redemption is present throughout Hillesum's writings. For Etty Hillesum, redemption took the form of her refusal to hate the Germans for their abhorrent treatment of the Jews. Redemption also takes the form of choosing to consciously, purposefully maintain her belief in the beauty of life, the power and compassionate mercy of God and her own capacity to counteract self-pity and bitterness by simply focusing more intently on the larger picture. To Etty Hillesum, every soul was sacred, without exception. There is a core belief at work in Hillesum's diaries and letters which necessitates the valuing of people rather than their behaviors.

Also in play is the spirituality-based contention that no one is beyond help; no one is unworthy of compassion and love. Etty Hillesum was able to truly distinguish the person from the action and the action from the motivation. She had a finely tuned sense of right and wrong which went well beyond questions of who did what to whom. In Hillesum's view, all human beings had the potential to be saved from themselves, their fears, and their personal pain simply by allowing life to wash over the self and maintaining a stance of acceptance. Redemption as a concept is subtly handled by Etty Hillesum in that she serves as her own example thereof. In other words, Etty understood that in some way she had been redeemed, salvaged by something or someone greater than herself. She chose to call it God. Others call it mind or Jehova or any number of other names. What is important to remember is that Hillesum was not just about elevating the Jews or the Dutch or any other group of people. She had an acute sense that what she did, who she had become, would in some way save the human race.



Style

Perspective

The work in its entirety is written from Etty Hillesum's viewpoint. She is the sole narrator of the diary entries and the letters from the Westerbork concentration camp. Since *An Interrupted Life* is essentially a memoir, one would expect that it would be written from the perspective of the individual who lived the events described. What makes this memoir so unusual is the fact that everything Hillesum writes about is happening in the moment and not about what went on in the past. Thus, the reader is given a "real time" type of account of the author's life. In addition, it is worth noting that by being able to read Hillesum's diaries and letters from her period of captivity one has the sense of her in a "before-and-after" way. That is to say, in the beginning the diary serves as a snapshot of a young woman who chronicles her emotional struggles and life events. When Hillesum begins writing, it is to improve herself; to make her more conscious of her own inner workings. However, around 1942, the tone of the diary changes and one is given a glimpse of Hillesum's life as a Jew who is persecuted during what came to be known as The Holocaust.

Tone

It is entirely likely that Etty Hillesum never intended to share her diaries with anyone. Thus, the tone of the entries is not conversational as such. At the beginning of the diary, Hillesum's tone is self-reflexive and she chastises herself regularly for what she considers her personal faults and failings. To carry this point one step further, in various places, Hillesum refers to herself as "my girl" and "sister" as on pages 8 and 9, respectively.

Alternately, Hillesum uses the diary as a tool for self examination and introspection as well as a detailed account of the day-to-day events in her life. In those instances in which she is simply reporting the "news" of the day, her tone is editorial. Hillesum comments on everything from the mundane ("What a lot there is to deal with on my desk.") to the ethereal ("Oh God, times are too hard for frail people like myself.").

Unlike her personal diaries, Hillesum's letters from the Westerbork transit camp have a completely different tone and impact. Hillesum's letters are addressed to a number of different friends of hers, living free lives in Amsterdam. Each letter has its own emotional undercurrent. In some instances, Hillesum is hopeful and optimistic about the future. At other times, the author succumbs to despair and sadness when faced with the inevitability of her impending fate.



Structure

An Interrupted Life is Etty Hillesum's diary and its structure is that of a personal journal. Often, the day of the week is given as well as the date. In many cases, the author also includes the time of day at which an entry was written. Since An Interrupted Life is a diary, reading the entries allows one to progress through the days the same way Etty Hillesum does, one step at a time, one idea at a time. The result is that Etty Hillesum functions as a kind of tour guide who facilitates the audience's journey into Hillesum's intellectual and emotional landscapes. Hillesum writes her way through the mundane parts of her life as well as the more moving and profound moments along the way. Interestingly, it is possible to open the book at any point and read something encouraging or uplifting.

The second part of Hillesum's memoir is comprised of her letters to friends written from the Westerbork transit camp. Like the diary which precedes them, the letters describe the daily lives and surroundings of people in the camp. The Letters from Westerbork portion differs from An Interrupted Life in that Hillesum's spiritual transformation has already begun by the time she is interned. That being said, the tone of these letters is much more serious and introspective than that of many of Hillesum's diary entries.



Quotes

"And now that I don't want to own anything any more and am free, now I suddenly own everything, now my inner riches are immeasurable" (Page 16).

"To live fully, outwardly and inwardly, not to ignore the external reality for the sake of the inner life, or the reverse, that's quite a task" (Page 25).

"He kissed my thighs and I grew lonelier still. He said, 'That was lovely,' and I went home with a leaden, sad, abandoned feeling" (Page 26).

"My immediate reaction on meeting a man is invariably to gauge his sexual possibilities. I recognize this as a bad habit that must be stamped out" (Page 37).

"No doubt that's recorded somewhere in our mythology: a Jew moving along, wrapped in a cloud" (Page 43).

"Stomachache and depression and that taut sensation inside me and the feeling of being crushed under a heavy weight are the price I have to pay for my grasping insistence on knowing everything about life, on being aware of everything" (Page 49)

"[L]ife is beautiful and so rich. So beautiful and so rich that it makes you want to believe in God" (Page 97).

"Through suffering I have learned that we must share our love with the whole of creation" (Page 147).

"And God is not accountable to us or the senseless harm we cause one another. We are accountable to Him!" (Page 150).

"There will be other faces, too, in which we shall be able to read something we understand: that German soldiers suffer as well" (Page 156).

"And if God does not help me to go on, then I shall have to help God" (Page 173).

"I shall become the chronicler of our adventures. I shall forge them into a new language and store them inside me should I have no chance to write things down" (Page 195).

"If I have one duty in these times, it is to bear witness" (Page 219).

"I felt it once more in the flesh, last night, what human beings have to suffer these days. It is good to be reminded of that from time to time, if only to learn how to fight it" (Page 219).

"What matters is not whether we preserve our lives at any cost, but how we preserve them. I sometimes think that every new situation, good or bad, can enrich us with new insights" (Page 251).



"But living in fear for your loved ones, knowing that an infinitely long martyrdom is in store for them while your own life here stays relatively idyllic is something few can bear" (Page 297).

"Sometimes I walk through the camp laughing secretly to myself because of the completely grotesque circumstances. One would have to be a great poet indeed to describe them; perhaps in about ten years might get somewhere near it" (Page 305).

"I have a fever and something poetically termed the runs; half the camp has got it at the moment but I never like staying in bed, I prefer making myself useful" (Page 310).

"[A]t a given point, you can no longer do, but can only be and accept" (Page 314).

"What will this young woman, already in a state of collapse, look like after three days in an overcrowded freight car with men, women, children, and babies all thrown together, bags and baggage, a bucket in the middle their only convenience?" (Page 348).

"My God, are the doors really being shut now? Yes, they are [...] Through small openings at the top we can see heads and hands, hands that will wave to us later when the train leaves" (Page 353).

"A soul is forged out of fire and rock crystal" (Page 229).

"My heart is a floodgate for a never-ending tide of misery" (Page 207).

"How is it that this stretch of heathland surrounded by barbed wire, through which so much human misery has flooded, nevertheless remains inscribed in my memory as something almost lovely?" (Page 209).



Topics for Discussion

What reason does Etty give for volunteering to work at Westerbork?

What is significant about the fact that Hillesum was born at the beginning of World War I and died during World War II?

Why does Etty refuse to go into hiding like so many other Jews?

How does wrestling with Julius Spier affect Etty?

At which point in *An Interrupted Life* does Etty Hillesum's focus shift from her daily life to matters of higher spiritual significance? In other words, when does Etty begin speaking to God in her diary?

What justification does Etty Hillesum give for refusing to hate the Germans? Cite examples from the text to support your answer.

Explain author Eva Hoffman's assertion that, "Etty had the kind of genius for introspection that converts symptoms into significance" (Introduction, vii).