How We Remember:

The Literature of Richard Wright and Elie Wiesel as Historical Records

by

Brenda Joyce Robinson

A thesis presented for the B.A. degree

with Honors in

The Department of English

University of Michigan

Spring 2000

Acknowledgements

I wish to express my deepest appreciation to the following scholars and supporters who assisted me as I embarked upon my journey to explore the significance of the writers Richard Wright and Elie Wiesel as two of humankind's greatest voices in history:

Arlene Keizer, a dedicated advisor whose every course offering I made a wise effort to find a place for myself in, for her patience, encouragement, thoroughness, and sincere interest in guiding my development as a writer.

Merla Wolk, who unselfishly agreed to advise me in the completion of my single most important written work as an undergraduate, and whose enthusiasm for the subject matter of my thesis never waned.

George Bornstein, who, though on leave for the year, graciously met with me in order to quiet my concerns over being of a sufficient authority to speak on matters of Jewish history, of a culture that is not my own, but whose history, along with that of my own culture, I wish to join its members in remembering.

I wish to also thank Dr. Ralph D. Story, with whom I share an intense enthusiasm for the works of Richard Wright, for his endless encouragement of my work on this thesis, and virtually all of my other academic pursuits here at the University of Michigan; John Kucich, who listened intently to my ideas and directed me, accordingly, to George Bornstein; John Whittier-Ferguson, whose good-natured humor and respect have increased my appreciation for being an honors student; and the University of Michigan Honors Program in English Class of 2000. To the latter, I am grateful for allowing me to spend my final undergraduate year with those who have proven themselves to be some of the University of Michigan's brightest stars.

Finally, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my family members and friends who followed my progress throughout my passionate, and at times emotional, quest to remember two of humankind's most dramatic moments in history, and two of the greatest historians of the literary world, whose works attest to the power of remembering.

Abstract

The writers Richard Wright and Elie Wiesel are two voices in literature whose respective accounts of their experiences with racial and religious oppression have effectively preserved the enormity of two very specific moments in history. Wright's heartbreaking tale of a "black boy" struggling to come of age in the Jim Crow South, and Wiesel's harrowing account of his survival of the Holocaust, both demonstrate the extent to which a literary account of a dramatic moment in history can broaden our perceptions of these moments. Wright and Wiesel's delineation of the consequences of racial and religious oppression through autobiographical accounts do much to ensure that these episodes, and the memory of those who experienced them, are never lost in history. Each renders his own experiences more immediate to his audience than does a factual reading of historical text, and therefore, I will argue, more meaningful, ultimately influencing the way in which history is remembered.

Wright's Black Boy and Wiesel's Night both represent the power of literature to function as a social record of history. Their stories are historically significant because they are monuments to the dramatic periods of the racial oppression of Blacks in the American South, and the religious persecution and ethnic genocide of Jews in Europe. The survival of their stories into further generations rests in large part upon their memory. By choosing to retell their stories through *autobiography*, both Wright and Wiesel show the ways in which literature and history have an impact upon one another.

My exploration of the significance of Wright and Wiesel as historians through their writing of literature will begin with an examination of precisely what led each ultimately to decide to contribute their stories to humankind's record of history. Wright was confronted by the question of his own authority as an African-American writer to champion the cause of his people, and the limitations he faced on being free to be completely truthful in telling his story. Wiesel is so disturbed by the nature of the atrocities that he lives through, that he walks away from the concentration camps for the final time, and maintains a silence regarding his Holocaust experience that was to last for a decade. Yet, by daring to break their respective silences, each became two of humankind's greatest voices in history.

A fuller understanding of the distinction between literary accounts and the historical records of dramatic moments in history is most evident in the content of Wright and Wiesel's interpretations of their experiences. My discussion of Black Boy will include an examination of the reality of living under the system of Jim Crow segregation, the consequences of the characteristic mis-education of the Negro, and the impact of racism on the life chances of African-Americans. In Night, I will examine Wiesel's frequent use of the metaphor of the lost dream, his insight into the reversal of the roles of parent and child, and the images of darkness and night that symbolize the evil and hopelessness of the Holocaust. Through Wright and Wiesel's writing, history becomes fact with testimony, necessarily completed by the account of the witness.

The significance of Black Boy and Night stems from their being a means by which Wright and Wiesel serve as voices for their respective oppressed cultural groups. Ultimately, this thesis will uncover how Wright and Wiesel's use of literary language as a medium of memory helped them to re-work the imaginative world in which they wrote, and the ways in which their autobiographies are enormous contributions to history.

CONTENTS

Short Titles

RW: Bone, Robert. Richard Wright. Minneapolis: Jones Press, University of Minnesota, 1969.

LN: Fine, Ellen S. Legacy of Night: The Literary Universe of Elie Wiesel. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982.

HH: Schuster, Ekkehard and Reinhold Boschert-Kimmig. Hope Against Hope: Johann Baptist Metz and Elie Wiesel Speak Out on the Holocaust. New York: Paulist Press, Inc., 1999.

ARS: Wiesel, Elie. All Rivers Run To The Sea: Memoirs. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995.

KM: Wiesel, Elie. From the Kingdom of Memory: Reminiscences. New York: Summit Books, 1990.

N: Wiesel, Elie. Night. New York: Hill & Wang, 1960.

BB: Wright, Richard. Black Boy. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1937.

Why We Remember

The writers Richard Wright and Elie Wiesel are two voices in literature whose respective accounts of their experiences with racial and religious oppression have effectively preserved the enormity of two very specific moments in history. Wright's heartbreaking tale of a "black boy" struggling to come of age in the Jim Crow South, and Wiesel's harrowing account of his survival of the Holocaust, both demonstrate the extent to which a literary account of a dramatic moment in history can broaden our perceptions of these moments. Greater than a standard assemblage of historical facts in a text, literature provides the most moving account of these periods in history. Wright and Wiesel's delineation of the consequences of racial and religious oppression through autobiographical accounts do much to ensure that these episodes, and the memory of those who experienced them, are never lost in history. Each renders his own experiences more immediate to his audience than does a factual reading of historical text, ultimately influencing the way in which history is remembered.

While Wright's Black Boy is considered a part of the "literature of social protest," and Wiesel's Night a part of the "literature of witness," both represent the power of literature to function as a social record of history. Their stories are historically significant because they are monuments to the dramatic periods of the racial oppression of Blacks in the American South, and the religious persecution and ethnic genocide of Jews in Europe. The survival of their stories into further generations rests in large part upon their memory. By choosing to retell their stories through *autobiography*, using the first-person narrative characteristic of this form, dramatic imagery, and a poignant portrayal of physical and social suffering, both Wright and Wiesel show the ways in which literature

and history have an impact upon one another. Wright and Wiesel make these experiences personal to the reader, and therefore, I will argue, more meaningful, bringing their audience to a fuller understanding of the enormity and significance of these events in an effort to ensure that these moments are never forgotten.

My exploration of the significance of Wright and Wiesel as historians through their writing of literature will begin with an examination of the factual record of their lives to discover precisely what led each ultimately to decide to contribute their stories to humankind's record of history. Wright was confronted by the question of his own authority as an African-American writer to champion the cause of his people, and the limitations he faced on being free to be completely truthful in telling his story. He was, at once, obligated to leave out aspects of his experiences that would otherwise offend his white audience, and at the same time bound by a duty to himself and his community to spare no detail that may have prevented him from doing justice to the experiences of his people. Yet, having been denied for much of his life a sense of autonomy, Wright eventually breaks free of the anonymity of the black experience and trades his silence for words. Similarly, Wiesel is forced to undergo a process of coming to terms with the painful memories of his experiences before electing to commit his account to literature. Wiesel is so disturbed by the nature of the atrocities that he lives through, that he walks away from the concentration camps for the final time, and maintains a silence regarding his Holocaust experience that was to last for a decade. Wright intended his literature to serve as a wake-up call to America regarding the evils of racism and segregation. Wiesel adopted a similar theme of recognizing oppression and more, choosing to observe an obligation to remember the Holocaust for the sake of those left in its wake. By daring to

break their respective silences, each became two of humankind's greatest voices in history.

A fuller understanding of the distinction between literary accounts and the historical records of dramatic moments in history is most evident in the content of Wright and Wiesel's interpretations of their experiences. In particular, it is necessary to examine which specific moments they choose to fully represent their experiences, and the dominant themes and structures of both Black Boy and Night. Wright and Wiesel illustrate the dramatic effects achieved by the eloquent use of literary devices such as emotionally moving imagery, and recurring metaphors of hope and despair, both complemented by the use of language that spares few details, regardless of whether these memories are comforting or disturbing. For Wright and Wiesel, literature moves history beyond being a mere listing of facts, for through their writing, history becomes fact with testimony, necessarily completed by the account of the witness.

When Richard Wright wrote Black Boy, and Elie Wiesel Night, their works were affected to a certain extent by the specific cultural, political, and social influences of the times in which they wrote, and this is reflected in their writing. Black Boy and Night are each subject to a dual system of interpretation: the way in which their works were received was largely reflective of the time period in which the events happened, and the time period in which they were written. Wright and Wiesel wrote with an awareness of these changing moments, and the initial introductions of their respective autobiographies in a number of ways reflected the public's level of comfort with the content of their works. Still, their stories remained relevant from their beginnings, and the power of their tales survived arguably undiminished.

Black Boy and Night are significant as being a means by which Wright and Wiesel serve as voices for their respective oppressed cultural groups. The impact that Wright and Wiesel's efforts have had on the way in which the history of their people is remembered cannot be underestimated. Ultimately, we must discover how Wright and Wiesel's use of literary language as a medium of memory helped them to re-work the imaginative world in which they wrote, and the ways in which their autobiographies are enormous contributions to history.

Richard Wright Turns to Words as a Weapon for Social Change

In the twentieth-century American landscape, the plight of the African-American is accented by a quest to find an identity in a society that relegates all of their kind to a realm of anonymity. The world of Richard Wright is shaped by the dominating presence of racism, laws that maintain social exclusion, and an anatomy of power that infringes upon the rights of society's downtrodden. While coming of age in the Deep South, in Mississippi, Tennessee, and then Arkansas, Wright reaches his manhood in a place where African-Americans are stripped of dignity, and autonomy, and where black dreams are left unrealized. With words, Wright attempts to share with the world the meaning of growing up black under circumstances that constrict and suppress the development of those who dwell on the margins of society. Wright observes his experiences until he becomes an adult, eventually transcending his lack of formal education, promising silence no more, and rebelling with his pen in a fury of genius that has stung America's conscience even to the present.

Richard Wright found early inspiration in the writings of H.L. Mencken, whose books he cleverly obtained from a local library by forging a note which he describes in

Black Boy: "Dear Madam: Will you please let this nigger boy have some books..." (*BB* p. 270). Wright found himself riveted by Mencken's denouncement of all things American, and as he literally stands up to absorb the reality of Mencken's words, he remarks

> Yes, this man was fighting, fighting with words. He was using words as a weapon, using them as one would use a club. Could words by weapons? Well, yes, for here they were. Then, maybe, perhaps, I could use them as a weapon? No. It frightened me. I read on and what amazed me was not what he said, but how on earth anybody had the courage to say it. (*BB* p. 272)

For Richard Wright, the medium of literature proved to be a highly effective means by which he expressed his dissatisfaction with the circumstances of his childhood. Instead of offering a lengthy discourse on the problems of black and white relations in America that were present during the period of his youth, he decides to make his social commentary by weaving the events of his life into narrative form, as seen from a first-person perspective. Rather than allow himself to be intimidated by societal constraints on his freedom to speak against his oppressive social conditions, Wright composes a powerful tale in which he refuses to mince words in describing the impact that his childhood circumstances had on his mental and physical development. In the words of Robert Bone in Richard Wright, Wright "...invades the silent places of the human heart and bruits his discoveries to the world" (*RW* p. 13). In Black Boy Wright recalls the pain of living under a system of inequality where he was denied the freedom to speak, to learn, and to live independently and respectably. Bone says of Wright: "To speak out at all costs; to refuse to be intimidated into silence: this is the force behind the stridency and

clamor of his prose" (*RW* p. 15). Rather than harbor his anger for an eternity and wither away into obscurity, Wright shares his story with the world in order to call necessary attention to one of America's darkest periods. Wright makes his concern universal, emphasizing the ways in which all of humanity is affected even as only one of its parts is made to bear the weight of oppression.

The constant threat of becoming the victims of the reigning racial terrorism that engulfed their society contributed to instilling a *fear* within African-Americans of speaking about the horrors that they frequently witnessed. In Black Boy, Wright recalls the story of the murder of his Uncle Hoskins at the hands of whites who resented his thriving liquor business. With their own lives now in peril, Wright's family fled Elaine, Arkansas, and went into seclusion in neighboring West Helena. Wright regards his flight from Elaine as his "first baptism of racial emotion" (*BB* p. 58). Wright's reference to this experience as a "baptism" symbolizes the way in which his childhood was virtually washed over with a keen sense of southern racial tension. Wright remembers this period of devastation as being devoid of a funeral, music, and mourning, but nonetheless fraught with the anxiety and constant dread of impending danger. The abruptness with which Uncle Hoskins had simply been permanently removed from their lives caused young Richard to question the larger plight of African-Americans. He writes, "This was as close as white terror had ever come to me and my mind reeled. Why had we not fought back, I asked my mother, and the fear that was in her made her slap me into silence" (*BB* p. 64). For African-Americans, being stunned into silence, by a parent's reprimand, or by the greater circumstances of oppression, was a reflection of the hopelessness of their pre-determined life chances. However, for Richard Wright, this constant suppression of his

inquisitiveness and curiosity regarding these harsh, unacceptable ways of black life further fueled him to learn more, to understand his existence, and to be a witness to his own past for humanity.

In Richard Wright, Robert Bone argues that Wright's motivation for writing stemmed from his ardent effort to break free from his pre-determined place of subjugation within society. Bone writes

> The more his society insisted on setting artificial bounds to his experience, the greater his compulsion to trespass, to taste forbidden fruit. The more his society conspired against his human weight and presence, the more determined he became to assert himself, to compel recognition of his individuality. Hence his urge to write, which was born of a fierce desire to affirm his own reality. (*RW* p. 14-15)

If Wright was without an identity, then his lack of identity would be further underscored by his lack of voice. Through literature, Wright was not required to remain silent about his experiences, thus he wrote Black Boy with an aggression that permitted him to give an authentic and tremendously compelling account of southern black life in the early part of the twentieth century. In Richard Wright: A Biography, Constance Webb recalls an early lecture that Wright gave at Fisk University in 1943 in which he described his childhood to an interracial audience. During the course of his speech, Wright noticed that the reaction to the story of his youth was one of distinct discomfort on the part of the audience. Yet, Wright was not surprised, for he noted that

> Such disclosures as he was making were supposed to be hidden or discussed in privacy. Neither Negro or white wanted a description of the shabbiness and

> emptiness of life lived under white domination as reflected in the personalities and relationships in his own family. No one wanted to hear about the fear and terror and dread inculcated in a Negro unless smoothed over with panaceas. (p. 206)

Thus, the audience itself departed cloaked in silence—no further inquiries, nor applause. In Russell Carl Brignano's Richard Wright: An Introduction to the Man and His Works, Rebecca C. Barton is cited as affirming that Wright is "the most genuine representative of lower-class life and in the best position to portray its hunger, its misery, its despair" (p. 5). Indeed, not only was Wright an authoritative voice of black oppression, but he was firm in his determination to shed light on an important phase of American history from the vantage point of one who had been there.

To imagine the number of voices that have passed on with stories untold is to give further recognition to the profound importance of Richard Wright's work. In Richard Wright and Racial Discourse, Yoshinobu Hakutani describes the narrator Wright as "...a spokesman for the voiceless black youths of the South he had known" (p. 124). By examining the effects that the South's racial climate has on the life chances of blacks in Black Boy, Wright pays homage to the life experiences of all who have endured oppression while being rendered silent. By using the story of his childhood to bring awareness to the racial problem in America, Wright demonstrates how the devastating effects of racism create a binding system that structures the social position of blacks, and that is designed to deny them a place in the American social order. Of even greater importance is the fact that Wright provides powerful evidence as to why the significance of these experiences cannot be ignored. Wright shows the extent to which they are an

integral and undeniable part of American history, highlighting the tremendous effects that this period of segregation had upon the larger social, economic, and political structure of America in the twentieth century.

Drawing upon his authority as one who has personally encountered racism and discrimination in the Jim Crow South, Wright establishes his position as one equipped to capture the essence of his own experiences, and the experiences of others who suffered with him, through autobiography. In The Emergence of Richard Wright, Keneth Kinnamon summarizes Wright's aim as "...to impart to the white reader the full horror of the racist assault on the human personality..." (p. 34). Wright's place in the midst of a tense racial climate lent him a unique perspective on southern black life that allowed him to formulate an unmatched account of what it means to live through miserable conditions, and survive to write about them. Black Boy is Wright's outward protest of an inner turmoil that had been festering within him since early in his childhood.

With few outside resources to satisfy his childhood curiosities, it seems fitting that Wright eventually develops a keen interest in reading, where he can escape into places without boundaries. Wright regards reading as a means by which he can journey into a world sans oppression while basking in the glory of imaginative freedom. Kinnamon writes: "From the restrictive and oppressive atmosphere of his actual life, (Wright) turned avidly to the imaginative and emotional liberation that reading could bring" (p. 36). Taking this one step further, Wright found that "Reading constituted an escape from reality, but writing could give a kind of creative mastery over reality" (p. 37). Wright learned early on the power of words to elicit a response from his audience that challenges them to gain a fuller understanding of his plea for a recognition of, and

resolution to, black oppression. Wright provokes all to actively read his tale, by absorbing his re-telling of history in order to further understand the impact of the reality of the Jim Crow circumstance on black life. Wright's hope is to inspire his audience to remember history as it really occurred, through the life stories of those who lived in these moments.

Though Wright claimed to be submitting "a record of (his) childhood and youth," the credibility of his autobiography was nonetheless called into question by those who doubted the authenticity of his account because its content was so disturbing. In Richard Wright and Racial Discourse, Yoshinobu Hakutani defends Wright against such criticism, insisting that "Wright cannot be criticized for his subject matter, for he is not responsible for the world he did not make" (p. 117). Hakutani also points out that even those who did accept Black Boy as authentic still questioned its effectiveness as an autobiography. Hakutani recalls comments made by William Faulkner, himself familiar with Southern black life, in a letter to Wright regarding his level of artistry in Black Boy. He wrote "The good lasting stuff comes out of one individual's imagination and sensitivity to and comprehension of the sufferings of Everyman, Anyman, not out of the memory of his own grief" (p. 115). Faulkner's belief that a true autobiography requires a distancing on the part of the author from his own life experiences suggests a restriction placed on Wright's desire to tell his life simply as it happened. In many ways, Wright creates a more powerful text by recounting the most mind-boggling events of his life almost matter-of-factly, as if daily injustice was to be expected. It is my contention that, in order to be most effective, Wright needed to speak as an unmediated authority, and not from the perspective of one impersonally detached.

In The Art of Richard Wright, Edward Margolies argues that Wright had three specific intentions in writing Black Boy. In explaining two of them, he says

> (Wright) was first concerned with describing his own intellectual and emotional growth—and explaining how it was that he did not fall into the stereotyped pattern of the behavioral responses of the southern Negro community. He was also interested in showing how the caste system literally blights the lives of the Negro minority. (p. 17)

In Black Boy, Wright provides a testimony to the possibilities of transcending physical oppression, while simultaneously revealing the paradoxical narrowness with which this is achieved by the few individual blacks who are fortunate enough to wrestle themselves from its grip. Thus, Margolies concludes that "Wright artfully contrives the case against Negro oppression—by focusing attention on himself who, paradoxically, escaped its worst ravages" (p. 20). Wright effectively uses the medium of story telling as a way of voicing his own inner turmoil. But more than that, he also makes a convincing case for the recognition of the ongoing pervasiveness of a racism that he merely began to experience in his youth, but that continued well until the end of his own life.

Elie Wiesel Gives a Voice to His Memory of the Holocaust

At the dawn of each new morning, the fiery sun makes her ascent, a light of false promise, shining brightly upon another dark day in Jewish history. For Jews in Auschwitz, there is no new beginning, no chance to leave behind the pain of the previous day, for there remains the memory of the horrors of the previous night—death strewn across the grounds of the concentration camp, and suffocating the minds of its victims. As the Holocaust rages on in Night, we witness the way in which Elie Wiesel evolves

from an acute awareness of his suffering to a numbing endurance of his pain. It seems as if his entire youth passes from the time he begins his story, but, in fact, he has seen the unspeakable all before he has reached the age of sixteen. By the time he is finally released from the concentration camps, he is stunned into filling his solitude with a silence that is to last for ten years.

To confront the tragic memories of a world gone wrong is a formidable task, but eventually, one must come to grips with this past in order to cross the threshold of silence into the realm of spoken remembrance. Indeed, the life and death of one's culture depends on the preservation of these moments. Thus, Elie Wiesel gathered his memories of history and committed them to literature. His words have forever increased the magnitude of history because of the uninhibited way in which he is able to provide a more authentic representation of the Holocaust—*he had been there*. The world's memory of the Jewish Holocaust has been personalized by Wiesel, for it is difficult to ignore the voice of the survivor. Few can grasp without difficulty the enormity of the tragedy of which Wiesel spoke. But if fate and circumstance, or his own heavy heart, had suppressed his voice, the world would have fewer opportunities to try.

And this, in Wiesel's view, is his ultimate obligation to his people—to remember, or as he says in his own words in Hope Against Hope, "...it is the obligation to remember that drives me to take pen in hand and write one word after another" (*HH* p. 68). Wiesel spends the remainder of his life writing in memory of the Holocaust, and acting on his commitment to the preservation of human rights the world over. Wiesel frames his message to humanity as this:

> Never fight against memory. Even if it is painful, it will help you; it will give you something; it will enrich you. Ultimately, what would culture be without memory?...One cannot exist without remembrance. (*HH* p. 68)

For Wiesel, confronting his memory of the Holocaust is inevitable and necessary in order for him to reveal what he saw during the long days and nights he spent in captivity. Wiesel's recollection of his time spent as a prisoner, of being separated from his mother and sister in the beginning, even as he is unaware that it is for the last time, or in the end of seeing his father on his last night of life, and waking up the next morning to see that he is gone, is far more powerful than an historical record devoid of testimony. Wiesel urges all to feel as deeply as they can, not to ignore our heart's response to the misery of the Holocaust.

The concentration camp is a place where death is experienced without dignity, where lives are snatched away abruptly, without remorse, and without honor. Vibrant human lives are reduced to heaps of ashes. In Hope Against Hope, Ekkehard Schuster and Reinhold Boschert-Kimmig refer to Wiesel's motivation with this reminder:

> Those who died in the furnaces did not find a cemetery; their bodies were transformed into plumes of smoke. The only place that is truly theirs is the remembrance of those who survived and those born after them. If these forget, then they kill a second time. Remembering the victims, human beings have—perhaps—the power to create the present and future in a more human way than in the past. (*HH* p. 61)

The graves of those who did not make it out of Auschwitz, Buna, Birkenau, Buchenwald, and all other concentration camps, are marked by Wiesel's account of their plight as

recorded in Night. Their bodies may have vanished into the winds, but honor is given to them by those who pay tribute to the fate that befell them during this tragic moment in history. In this way, Wiesel can use his capacities as a writer to wage war against social injustice, for he says "Because of what I experienced in Auschwitz...I try today to raise my voice wherever men and women are suffering injustice" (*HH* p. 81). Wiesel speaks in order to remind the world of why all must fight equally for the preservation of the humanity of all people, in the hope that the terror of the Holocaust can never be lived by any human being again.

Wiesel's literary account of his survival of the Holocaust is markedly different from the way in which the Holocaust is depicted in general historical accounts, and this is reflected in what Wiesel claims is one of the many purposes behind his writing of Night. In response to historians' suggestion that the story of the Holocaust be integrated into the larger record of history, Wiesel points out the impossibility of "normalizing" such an event, insisting that "One cannot repress an event of such magnitude" (*HH* p. 87). Even more alarming to Wiesel is the fact that, in this "historians' debate," some German historians base their work on the documents of the Nazi perpetrators, and not the testimonies of the individuals. Clearly demonstrating their regard of official documents as more significant than survivors' memories, these historians refuse to trust anything other than pure fact, a practice which Wiesel denounces, saying that "Facts and the truth are not the same thing" (*HH* p. 88). Wiesel suggests that while fact is informative, the truth is emotionally moving, and can be best gleaned, not from those who merely observe death, but from those whose experiences arise out of their having faced death.

If historians leave unacknowledged the way in which memory and history are interrelated, then they would be unable to fully understand the significance of the Holocaust. Wiesel says "...while memory can certainly get along without knowledge of historical facts, there can never be a science of history without memory" (*HH* p. 89-90). Wiesel writes Night in order to lend what he regards as a necessary ethical perspective to what might otherwise be accepted as objective, neutral history. He believes that the work of an historian "...must be animated by an ethical passion when researching documents and the fate of men and women" (*HH* p. 90). By considering the implications of the Holocaust within this ethical context, the historian allows for "...an historical judgment about what is good and what is wrong, what is evil and what is not" (*HH* p. 90). This method of recording history proves crucial to providing an understanding of the meaning of the Holocaust, and how it changed the face of an entire people, to surviving generations. For Wiesel, memory is that which allows reality itself to be commemorated, or remembered, including those details of the Holocaust that we wish to forget but must know.

In From the Kingdom of Memory: Reminiscences, Wiesel addresses the heart of the process by which he decides to tell his story. He says, "To forget is, for a Jew, to deny his people—and all that it symbolizes—and also to deny himself. Hence my desire to forget neither where I come from, nor what influenced my choices..." (*KM* p. 9). Because of the circumstances by which Jews were subjected to the attempted annihilation of their entire population, the preservation of the Jewish culture is profoundly sustained by memory. "To be Jewish is to remember—to claim our right to memory as well as our

duty to keep it alive" (*KM* p. 10), is what Wiesel concludes, and from this sentiment, Night is born.

In 1945, with the liberation of Buchenwald, where he finally ends up, Wiesel is thrown back into the society that exists outside of the prison gates as roughly as he has been forced away from it, overwhelmed with a hunger for food and freedom, and physically frail. Alone, and without a family, neighbors, or childhood companions, Wiesel eventually turns to words. Remembering the lowest moments of the Holocaust, Wiesel questions whether or not he would even be able to find the language to speak of the horrors before him, for no words seem to be able to bear the weight of such expression. Still, Wiesel adheres to the oath that all have taken: "If, by some miracle, I survive, I will devote my life to testifying on behalf of all those whose shadows will be bound to mine forever" (*KM* p. 15). Wiesel regards what some might consider the unpleasant task of writing as a survivor as an honor, for he ardently believes that, in suppressing his story with silence, he will be betraying his experience. "I owe the dead my memory" (*KM* p. 16) Wiesel says, for theirs is a history that cannot be forgotten.

Though Wiesel offers poignant insight into the experience of the Holocaust, he does not promise that the world will gain a complete understanding of its magnitude. Even after he has written, he speaks of his own lack of understanding of the nature of the atrocities, and why they were enacted upon the innocent. Wiesel writes, "And if I write, it is to warn the reader that he will not understand either. 'You will not understand, you will never understand,' were the words heard everywhere in the kingdom of night. I can only echo them" (*KM* p. 18). Night exists to help humanity to begin to sort through the complexities of the Holocaust, and to ensure that no victim died in vain. Whether or not

humanity can answer the question of why this occurred has no greater importance than the duty to honor those whose identities were extinguished in a bed of flames. As a witness for humanity, Wiesel's testimony is properly situated in the form of his brief, but extraordinary autobiography entitled Night.

The Jim Crow Circumstance: Richard Wright's Black Boy

As a youth, Richard Wright was made painfully aware of southern black and white race relations by his early encounters with the realities of Jim Crow living. In many ways, he dwelled in his own world of color-blindness, rarely taking notice of his designated "place" in the social hierarchy until it was necessary to confront this social reality. As Robert Bone describes it

> *Black Boy* forces us...to imagine southern life from a Negro point of view. What we discover from this harrowing perspective is that the entire society is mobilized to keep the Negro in his place: to restrict his freedom of movement, discourage his ambition, and banish him forever to the nether regions of subordination and inferiority. (*RW* p. 14)

Bone goes on to label this as an attempt to "mark off in advance the boundaries of human life" (*RW* p. 14). It is when his family embarks on their journey to Elaine, Arkansas, after having spent a time with his grandmother in Mississippi, that Wright experiences firsthand the dictates of racial segregation. In the railroad station, Wright recalls

> for the first time I noticed that there were two lines of people at the ticket window, a 'white' line and a 'black' line. During my visit at Granny's a sense of the two races had been born in me with a sharp concreteness that would never die until I died. When I boarded the train I was aware that we Negroes were in one

> part of the train and that the whites were in another. Naively I wanted to go and see how the whites looked while sitting in their part of the train. (*BB* p. 55)

When Wright asks his mother if he can "go and peep at the white folks" (*BB* p. 55), she responds harshly, insisting that he remain quiet, and rid himself of such foolish thoughts. Wright's inclusion of this particular moment in his childhood demonstrates the way in which members of the common human race were made to separate according to a set of laws that placed human beings into categories based on arbitrary classifications. Because the society of the American South conditioned blacks and whites to believe in their "inherent" separateness, as confounded by notions of the superiority of one race and the inferiority of the other, Wright's curiosity regarding southern whites was all the more peaked. Their distinction as a people made them appear almost as something other than human, as indicated by his desire to see how they looked as they sat in their section of the train. Puzzled by his mother's irritation at his inquisitiveness, Wright admits "I wanted to understand these two sets of people who lived side by side and never touched, it seemed, except in violence" (*BB* p. 55). For much of his youth, Wright's curiosity would remain unanswered. Yet, the story of his early life, and the innocent lens through which he viewed the world as recorded in Black Boy, provides a touching illustration of the profound unjustification of the laws of Jim Crow.

The ethics of Jim Crow living, as Wright phrases it in later works, almost literally infringed upon the life chances of black Americans, in a number of ways affecting even their physical well-being. At the point in his youth when his mother's health begins to fail rapidly, Wright receives another lesson on Jim Crow. After a visit to the doctor where she undergoes an operation, Wright witnesses his mother being removed from the

clinic destined for a rooming house. When he asks his Uncle Edward why she is transported this way, his Uncle Edward explains "There are no hospital facilities for colored, and this is the way we have to do it" (*BB* p. 110). Wright, again, provides another example of the ways in which blacks were relegated to a marginalized, separate realm of society, where their place was unequal. On her return home, she was made to ride on a stretcher in the baggage car. Wright's memory of the effects of Jim Crow on his family's efforts to maintain his mother's health gives insight into the human side of this period of racial segregation in America by illustrating the uneasy pattern of living that was required of all Negroes in the twentieth-century American South.

Throughout much of his autobiography, Wright reveals the personal disdain that he feels towards blacks who conformed exaggeratedly to the way in which they were expected to behave in the segregated South. Once, Wright is confronted by his Uncle Tom (whose name, ironically, also serves as a symbol of his submissive disposition), who attempts to discipline him with a switch for being "sassy" and "impolite." Wright rebels against his uncle's "lesson," fiercely refusing to submit to his uncle's effort, as he says, "to teach me to act as I had seen the backward black boys act on the plantations...to grin, hang my head, and mumble apologetically when I was spoken to" (*BB* p. 174). While the plight of African-Americans is marked by both the period of their social and political subordination, and their subsequent battle for a place at the table of American citizenship, Wright provides a first-person account of the process by which African-Americans motivated themselves to rebel against their hopeless circumstances. As Bone argues, Wright's alienation from his own community stemmed from his being indignant towards "the willingness of southern Negroes to police themselves; to curb their natural impulses,

their speech and gestures, aspirations, hopes, and dreams" (*RW* p. 18). Though southern life prevented blacks from asserting themselves in their own society, still Wright vowed early in his youth to make every effort to ensure that his physical and intellectual growth would not be stifled by conforming to the behaviors expected of blacks as conditioned by their social oppression.

Wright certainly did not lack others around him who instilled in him an understanding of the appropriate ways to keep himself in line. During the period in his life when he moved through a series of petty jobs for a brief time, he sought out a former classmate, Griggs, to inquire about opportunities for finding work. During the course of their conversation, Griggs comes to judge Wright as being too overconfident as he absorbs his advice. Promptly snatching Wright by the shoulders, Griggs engages with him in the following brief exchange:

"Do you want to get killed?" (Griggs) asked (Wright).

"Hell, no!"

"Then, for God's sake, learn how to live in the South!" (*BB* p. 202)

Wright's anecdote confirms that it was not only whites who were conditioned to maintain the status quo, as history might suggest, but also blacks who, out of habit, took measures to check each other and, subconsciously, themselves. Wright and Griggs continue:

"Dick, look, you're black, black, *black*, see? Can't you understand that?"

"Sure, I understand it," I said.

"You don't act a damn bit like it," he spat. (*BB* p. 203)

Here, Griggs defines being "black" as automatically behaving in ways that outwardly emphasize their subordinate position to whites. In a further illustration of this point,

moments later a white woman and two white men emerged from the jewelry store that Griggs and Wright had been standing outside of, and though Wright steps out of their way to let them pass, Griggs nonetheless grabs hold of him and sends him stumbling further down the sidewalk, explaining "'I'm teaching you how to get out of white people's way'"(*BB* p. 203). Thus, Wright uses this episode in his youth to demonstrate that for blacks in the American South, it was not enough to recognize their place in society, for, in effect, every one of their behaviors had to serve as a convincing affirmation of their awareness, and acceptance, of their inferior position.

As he recounts his experience coming of age in the Jim Crow South, Wright offers a very passionate assessment, inserted parenthetically in the text of Black Boy, of the meaning of being black in America. He writes:

> (Whenever I thought of the essential bleakness of black life in America, I knew that Negroes had never been allowed to catch the full spirit of Western civilization, that they lived somehow in it but not of it. And when I brooded upon the cultural barrenness of black life, I wondered if clean, positive tenderness, love, honor, loyalty, and the capacity to remember were native with man. I asked myself if these human qualities were not fostered, won, struggled and suffered for, preserved in ritual from one generation to another). (*BB* p. 45)

As Wright confirms, it is early in the life of a black child that they are indoctrinated with the dictates of Jim Crow wisdom. These "gems" of wisdom, as they are sometimes called, are often imparted to the black child in the form of a parent harshly slapping their inquisitiveness back into silence, the necessity to learn the behaviors of subservience, and the requirement to function as unequal citizens in a socially fragmented society.

The Mis-Educated Negro

To aspire to be educated was an unrealistic, if not impossible, goal for the majority of black Americans during the time period of Richard Wright's youth. Whites' reactions to the idea of a black person attaining even a modest level of education ranged from mild amusement to biting scorn. Once, Wright held a job doing chores for a white family. As he is questioned by the mistress of the house, he reveals to her that he is in the seventh grade at school, to which she responds with surprise "Then why are you going to school?" (*BB* p. 162). Wright goes on to explain to her his dream of being a writer, and with a great deal of condescension she assures Wright "You'll never be a writer...Who on earth put such ideas into your nigger head?" (*BB* p. 162). As he left work that day, he knew that it would be for the last time, for Wright admits being deeply offended by her assault on his ability to succeed in life, and he resented her overwhelmingly. This early experience of having his effort to be educated discouraged by someone white set the tone for Wright's drive throughout the remainder of his life to acquire as much knowledge as he could. Regarding his dream of going North to write books, Wright later reveals

> I was building up in me a dream which the entire educational system of the South had been rigged to stifle...I was becoming aware of the thing that the Jim Crow laws had been drafted and passed to keep out of my consciousness...I was beginning to dream the dreams that the state had said were wrong, that the schools had said were taboo. (*BB* p. 186-187)

What plain history reveals is that blacks found their efforts to be educated regularly stifled by their circumstances of oppression. In some instances, this history has been interpreted in such a way that blacks were regarded as either too lazy to, or genetically

incapable of, being learned individuals. What Wright contributes to history is a promising example of one who, like a large number of blacks, aspired to rise out of poverty, to transcend educational barriers, and to essentially exist as a man. Equipped with dreams of being equal, Wright became a threat to his racialized society, enamored with his discovery of the power of knowledge, and the paths of possibility down which knowledge could take him.

Though the little formal schooling that Wright received in the early stages of his youth was greatly sporadic and highly fragmented, he, remarkably, manages to graduate from Junior High School as valedictorian nonetheless, and is asked to prepare a speech. Yet, Wright finds himself extremely surprised and caught off guard when he is summoned to the principal's office and handed a pre-prepared speech written by the principal himself. Though the principal threatened Wright with not being allowed to graduate, after much debate, Wright sticks to his resolution to refuse to read someone else's thoughts and somebody else's written work, much to the principal's chagrin. As Wright explains: "The principal's speech was simpler and clearer than mine, but it did not say anything; mine was cloudy, but it said what I wanted to say" (*BB* p. 196). Wright's inclusion of this episode of censorship in the re-telling of his life story is a powerful demonstration of the limitations on freedom of thought and expression to which blacks were subjected during this time period. This controlling of black thought so as not to risk being received unfavorably by a white audience is reflected even in Wright's larger effort to write his autobiography, for he was faced with the dilemma of being at liberty to be truthful in relating the details of his childhood, while at the same time being careful not to discuss too much that might offend his white audience. In this way, Wright

also gives insight into the double-bind of freedom and confinement experienced by blacks who, at once, desired equality, but who at the same time had to remember the extent to which they could realize these conditions in practice. For Wright, maintaining his autonomy was a strong principle that he believed in, and this resolve subsequently guided him through a number of decisions that he comes to make throughout the remainder of his tale.

Shortly before Wright reaches the age of seventeen, he manages to secure a job working in an optical company run by several white men with the help of his former classmate, Griggs. Even as Griggs informs him of the position and his opportunity to learn a trade, he warns Wright to "remember to keep your head. Remember you're black" (*BB* p. 205). Here, again, Wright receives his standard reminder to police himself and carefully regulate his own actions in order to remain humble. When he arrives on the first day, Wright says

> I was reminding myself that I must be polite, must think before I spoke, must think before I acted, must say 'yes sir, no sir,' that I must so conduct myself that white people would not think that I thought I was as good as they. (*BB* p. 205)

Wright reveals the ways in which blacks had to constantly mentally tax themselves in order to prove to whites that they knew of and accepted their supposed inferiority. Once, when one of his co-workers refused to answer his inquiry regarding the nature of the work, Wright returns to his boss to remind him of the promise that had been made to him to learn the trade, to which the boss responds "Nigger, you think you're white, don't you?" (*BB* p. 207). Here, Wright's efforts to be educated are again dismissed as a demonstration of his effort to be "white" instead of what they really signaled—that is, an

affirmation of his desire to know, and to be regarded as a human being. What Wright is forced to conclude is this: "I was black; I lived in the South. I would never learn to operate those machines as long as those two white men in there stood by them" (*BB* p. 211). Thus Wright is again forced into relinquishing an opportunity for advancing his own independence because of the threat his desire to be educated posed to the white-dominated society in which he struggled to come of age. Wright's experiences serve as a telling portrayal of the ways in which black intellectual growth continued to be stunted well into the twentieth century, even in the face of legislation that purported to grant them equal citizenship. The "education" of the Negro in the twentieth century American South did not consist of formal schooling, for as a race, they were required to know only the rules of living as delineated by the laws of Jim Crow, and their characteristic mis-education was aptly perpetuated.

The Meaning of Color

As perhaps its most important purpose, Wright's Black Boy serves as a powerful social commentary on the characteristic arbitrariness of racial classifications. Wright draws upon numerous incidents and encounters with whites throughout his childhood to illustrate the ways in which the concept of "racism" is more learned than it is inherent. Ironically, it is Wright's constant questioning of his surroundings that leads him to discover the dynamics of black and white race relations. Wright's recounting of stories of racial terror that frightened him can be interpreted as signaling the destruction of the innocence of his childhood, for what he learns early in his life shapes the way in which he continues to view the world. In explaining his tardiness in being able to distinguish "blacks" from "whites" Wright says

> Though I had long known that there were people called 'white' people, it had never meant anything to me emotionally. I had seen white men and women upon the streets a thousand times, but they had never looked particularly 'white.' To me they were merely people like other people, yet somehow strangely different because I had never come in close touch with any of them. (*BB* p. 30-31)

The view of the world from the perspective of a child that Wright presents shows the extent to which the notion of race is a social concept that bears no inherent meaning. As indicated by Wright's description of whites as not looking literally "white," Wright suggests that the idea of classifying people according to the color of their skin was a ludicrous concept at best. Wright's untainted view of the races was quite refreshing, and speaks to the hope that lies in being able to regard other human beings as individuals, and not solely as members of particular races. As we read Black Boy it is almost painful to witness the dismantling of the purity of the heart of a child, and it is unfortunate that his society would effectively condition him to abandon his unbiased racial views in order to understand his place as an "other."

With a knowledge of the threat of the white terror to which he could fall victim ever present in his mind, Wright describes a series of imaginings that he has that assist him in coping with the accompanying feeling of helplessness that he feels in the face of his circumstances. These thoughts, as Wright explains, allow him to "limp through days lived under the threat of violence" (*BB* p. 84). Most frightening was the fact that his reactions to white hostility became embedded within him, guiding his everyday functions and overwhelming his state of mind. Wright says

> These fantasies were no longer a reflection of my reaction to the white people, they were a part of my living, of my emotional life; they were a culture, a creed, a religion...It was as though I was continuously reacting to the threat of some natural force whose hostile behavior could not be predicted. I had never in my life been abused by whites, but I had already become as conditioned to their existence as though I had been the victim of a thousand lynchings. (*BB* p. 84)

Wright's account of the process by which he comes to a fuller understanding of the realities of racism show the way in which individuals were, in effect, forced to permit themselves to become fully consumed by *arbitrary* notions of race. Unlike a plain historical account, literature provides the reader access to the psychology behind the development of a distinct racial ideology within an individual. For Wright, notions of race were transformed from being mere observations to constituting a complete way of thinking, guiding both his reactions to whites and the way in which he was received by them.

Later in his teen years, Wright recalls a particularly alarming episode in which he experiences the bitter taste of racism in physical form. While returning from a delivery for a clothing store in which he worked as a porter, one of his bicycle tires gets a flat, and he is left to walk the remainder of the way back to town. Soon a car full of drunken young white men stops and offers Wright a ride, and after he boards, one promptly offers him a drink. Wright, remembering a previous experience with alcohol dating back to his childhood, laughs and declines, after which the man proceeds to smash the empty whiskey bottle right between his eyes, saying "Nigger, ain't you learned no better sense'n that yet?"..."Ain't you learned to say *sir* to a white man yet?" (*BB* p. 200). Even as they

drive away, they assure him that he was fortunate to have only encountered *them* and spoken in that manner, for if it had been any other white man, he likely would have been dead. Even though Wright meant no harm in his response, he suffered from the particulars of racism nonetheless simply by unintentionally "stepping out of line." Wright, like all blacks in the South, was forced to live a cautious existence, constantly in danger of saying or doing the wrong thing, of making mistakes that yielded pain or that ended fatally. Wright provides material that attempts to uncover the basis for the complicated nature of the relations between blacks and whites, for even when whites seemed to suspend their awareness of race and to appear well meaning, blacks were not permitted to venture into their separate sphere and feign an incognizance of race.

Wright's acknowledgement of the miserable living conditions of the South at one point leads him to assume a more noticeably reserved disposition as he continues to react to his plight. In contemplating his prospects for a promising future, Wright realizes that his expectations are null. He writes

> And the problem of living as a Negro was cold and hard. What was it that made the hate of whites for blacks so steady, seemingly so woven into the texture of things? What kind of life was possible under that hate? (*BB* p. 181)

The origins of notions of racial superiority and inferiority were not something that human beings were born with a knowledge of, and Wright's challenge of his circumstances gave further credence to the idea that blacks and whites could enjoy a finer existence if racial indoctrination were purged from society. Until then, as Wright indicates, all citizens would bear the weight of the problem of Negro inequality in America. Thus, Wright later concludes, "Although (blacks) lived in an America where in theory there existed equality

of opportunity, they knew unerringly what to aspire to and what not to aspire to" (*BB* p. 216). From their earliest comprehension, blacks were expected to know, and to act out without fault, their place in the social hierarchy, where any deviations from this established pattern brought certain consequences. Though laws heralding the equality of all Americans are noted throughout history, Wright's autobiographical version of history is a powerful example of the daily choices that blacks were required to make in order to survive in an uncompromising world, where what was guaranteed in principle and what was enacted in practice were mutually exclusive ideals.

In his presentation of Negro life in the Jim Crow South, Wright provides a literary wake-up call to all who aspire for social change. Black Boy is the story of that rare instance in which a lone black American is able to escape the devastation of segregated Southern life in order to pursue their destiny of freedom in the North. Despite his life of hardship, Wright held fast to his faith in the possibility of one day transcending social oppression and finding a more humane existence. At the end of his story, as he prepares for his journey North, Wright credits books with being ultimately responsible for his survival, for through literature, he was able to get "vague glimpses of life's possibilities" (*BB* p. 283). Though Wright was a product of the South, he tried hard not to live by its example, nor to become a victim to its aggression. Wright says

> The white South said that I had a 'place' in life. Well, I had never felt my 'place'...It had never occurred to me that I was in any way an inferior being. And no word that I had ever heard fall from the lips of southern white men had ever made me really doubt the worth of my own humanity. (*BB* p. 283)

Though it is true that blacks in America were left with little choice but to accept without rebellion their social condition, Wright's story is a representative testimony of those who were fortunate enough to discover that the world held higher possibilities for society's downtrodden. Wright's autobiography also provides a sound explanation for black resistance against racism and segregation. Though their stories went untold, there were still many like Wright who were never able to accept their status as an inferior being, nor to deny their own humanity in the face of injustice.

In the Kingdom of Darkness: Elie Wiesel's Night

For Elie Wiesel, the story of Night is his own complex vision of the human condition. Yet, the poignancy of his tale gains its force not only because it is told from the perspective of one who has been there, but also because it is narrated through the eyes of a child. In a collection of critical essays entitled Elie Wiesel: Between Memory and Hope, Daniel Stern writes "To see Auschwitz through the eyes of a child is to see the reality of evil revealed from its most telling perspective" (p. 44). Though now a man, Wiesel ventures back into the pain of his childhood, for in the words of Robert McAfee Brown "...we cannot indefinitely avoid depressing subject matter, particularly if it is true..." (*N, Preface* p. v) and so Wiesel opens his heart and draws us in for an eternity. By allowing readers throughout his story to walk alongside the victims as they languish in the concentration camps, and witness the pain of those who survive up until the moment they are released, the impact of the event can be more largely felt than a reading of the anonymous experience of nameless victims. Among the dominant themes and literary devices that give meaning to Night, I will consider, of note, the ways in which Wiesel shares his experience by discussing the metaphor of the lost dream, the

psychological reversal of the role of parent and child, and the use of images of darkness and night as symbols of the hopeless, evil, unimaginable world of the Holocaust.

Thief of Dreams

On that fateful morning when the Jews are first called out of the village to begin the march towards death, Wiesel remembers running into the house of one of his father's friends in order to warn him of the impending expulsion. Wiesel lingers long enough to watch as the stricken father wakes his family one by one, gently summoning his wife, but hastily interrupting the sleep of his children, and "...dragging them from their dreams" (*N* p. 13). This metaphor of the lost dream is one that would recur up until the terror of the Holocaust has finally ceased. While Jewish adults saw their lives abruptly cut off by the circumstances of death and captivity, Jewish children were denied a chance to even live at all. Wiesel's illustration of the process by which dreams were deferred for an eternity as a result of the Holocaust alludes to the crude manner in which lives were reversed without mercy and any semblance of humanity that may have existed within each individual was seized and cast away. Wiesel presents the human side to the Holocaust that the facts in a history book cannot reflect by giving readers a sense of the anxiety and fatigue that prefaced the arrival of the Jews in the concentration camps. Whereas a plain record of history gives primary focus to the particulars of the Holocaust from a generic account of the Jewish experience in the concentration camps for the population as a whole, Wiesel gives insight into the breaking down of the individual spirit, and the dehumanizing that had begun to occur long before the suffering of all was smashed together in history, undifferentiated. Throughout his autobiography, readers witness the evolution of Wiesel's character from an acute awareness of his suffering to a numbing

endurance of his pain. The night before his group begins their journey to Auschwitz, Wiesel recalls how he struggles to find rest, while contemplating his own "thoughts and memories." Little could Wiesel imagine that by the time this ordeal was over, thoughts and memories would be all that he has left to sort through.

The passage of time for the duration of the Holocaust seemed to occur without order, as eventually days blended into nights, and all of time became one long moment of suffering. In one of the earlier moments of their anticipation of deportation, Wiesel writes "Monday passed like a small summer cloud, like a dream in the first daylight hours" (*N* p. 16). As Wiesel's father noted, only a miracle could keep them at home, but soon the pattern of their lives would be as a recapitulation of the first day of their captivity—as a light of hope blighted by the darkness of despair. In Wiesel's searing account, the dreams of Jews vanished as fleetingly as the hours of their period of bondage.

In one of the rare instances in which Wiesel and his block were headed by a (German) Jew, Wiesel remarks on the relief that he feels for having a Jewish leader, who in this case, demonstrated some commitment to maintaining the well-being of his prisoners. Wiesel remembers, "Whenever he could, he would organize a cauldron of soup for the young ones, the weak, *all those who were dreaming more about an extra plateful than of liberty*" (*N* p. 49, *emphasis mine*). Ravaged by hunger, physically expended, and emotionally debilitated, the endurance of the larger plight was reduced to a quest for immediate daily survival. In Night, Wiesel effectively demonstrates the ways in which the concept of a dream was modified by the conditions of misery that characterized the daily existence of Jews during the period of the Holocaust. In

narratives of history, the desire for an end to the terror is easily inferred, yet the experience of Jews when viewed en masse is blanketed in anonymity, and the true power of this historical moment is virtually lost once it becomes impersonalized. From his perspective inside the camps, Wiesel reveals how individuals' larger aspirations of life that were present before the Holocaust were transformed into dreams of satiating one's physical appetite—now only to live, and to cling to the possibility of escape.

Several times throughout his tale, Wiesel recounts the numerous times in which the group is forced out of a steady march and into a frantic run from camp to camp. To stop, or even to pause, was to earn oneself death on the spot. Eventually, Wiesel remarks on how he loses consciousness of his own being, running because if he ceased he would die, running because if he slowed, he would be trampled to death by the men behind him who had not lost their strength. Wiesel writes:

> I was simply walking in my sleep. I managed to close my eyes and to run like that while asleep...All I had to do was to close my eyes for a second to see a whole world passing by, to dream a whole lifetime. (*N* p. 83)

He continues on that he was "dragged along by a blind destiny" (*N* p. 83), handing readers another interpretation of what becomes of a dream under the circumstances of the Holocaust. If he closed his eyes, he could shut out the present terror for a brief moment, but when he opens his eyes, his life, and the life of his brethren, has passed on, and though the fate of particular individuals is unknown, we can be certain that many have been brought closer to death. For many who close their eyes, and sink to the ground struggling with futility against defeat, the dream of reaching the end while still among the living is crushed under the weight of the men who gaze steadily ahead, without notice of

their fallen comrade whose journey ended hours before a light was to appear in the sky again.

Towards the end of his story, as Wiesel's group reaches Gleiwitz and is installed in the barracks, he finds himself walking over a familiar voice—that of Juliek, a young boy from Warsaw who he remembers as having played the violin in the band at Buna. Settling into the mass of bodies, a mix of the living with the dead, Wiesel later hears the sound of Juliek's violin—pure sounds punctuating a profound silence. Wiesel writes

> It was pitch dark. I could hear only the violin, and it was as though Juliek's soul were the bow. He was playing his life. The whole of his life was gliding on the strings—his lost hopes, his charred past, his extinguished future. He played as he would never play again. (*N* p. 90)

Wiesel includes this poignant moment so that readers may understand, arguably, one of the most moving, but otherwise unknown, moments of the Holocaust, for as Wiesel admits

> I shall never forget Juliek. How could I forget that concert, given to an audience of dying and dead men! To this day, whenever I hear Beethoven played my eyes close and out of the dark rises the sad, pale face of my Polish friend, as he said farewell on his violin to an audience of dying men. (*N* p. 90)

Wiesel does not hear the end of the "concert," for he is overcome with sleep, and awakens the next morning to the sight of Juliek who has died. This will not be the only time in which Wiesel awakens to a profound loss, as will be later discussed concerning the death of his own father. The memory of this sound of innocence arising out of the depths of hell is as important to contextualizing the Holocaust as is the final count of the

dead with which we are all already so familiar. A memory such as this can only be told by one who had a place among the dead, who reemerged from the shed, and who could contain their pain long enough to recount this experience again. As Wiesel demonstrates, the true historians are the ones who dwelled among men gone mad, on the brink of their own extinction, those who stood on the side of the grave not as ones directing who shall live and who shall step down into their doom, but as ones who know the feeling, the relief, of being turned away and offered a narrow escape of the grave.

Several decades after the first publication of Night, Wiesel comes to liken his Holocaust experience to a dream sequence that he describes, at some times in poetic form, in his memoirs entitled All Rivers Run to the Sea. Throughout the beginning of his memoirs, Wiesel speaks of several recurring dreams that he has of his father, many details of which remained obscured the deeper he delved into their meaning. As Wiesel observes, "In dreams all certainties are blurred and dimmed. Dawn and dusk, reality and fantasy, merge" (*ARS* p. 3). Here, as in Night, Wiesel makes reference to both the ideas of all days and nights turning into one long night of pain, and of the transformation of faint human hope into the brutal reality of the Holocaust. In the section of his memoirs that he calls "Darkness," Wiesel recalls several terrible moments in which he felt his own dreams vanish and which continue to haunt him. Regarding the initial expulsion of his community, Wiesel writes

> Certain images of the days and nights spent on that train invade my dreams even now: anticipation of danger, fear of the dark; the screams of poor Mrs. Schechter, who, in her delirium, saw flames in the distance; the efforts to make her stop; the

> terror in her little boy's eyes. I recall every hour, every second. How could I forget?...Yes, my memory gathered it all in, retained it all. (*ARS* p. 76)

Wiesel's story is far from being a generic historical account of the Holocaust experience, for he gives insight into another very important aspect of this tragedy: the post-traumatic effects of the Holocaust on the survivors. Wiesel also remembers the void left in his heart upon his separation from his mother and sisters, unknowingly, for the last time. He recalls

> What remains of that night like no other is an irremediable sense of loss, of parting. My mother and my little sister left, and I never said goodbye. It all remains unreal. It's only a dream, I told myself as I walked, hanging on my father's arm. It's a nightmare that they have torn me from those I love, that they are beating people to death, that Birkenau exists and that it harbors a gigantic altar where demons of fire devour our people. It's in God's nightmare that human beings are hurling living Jewish children into the flames. (*ARS* p. 77-78)

Wiesel adds that the source of his despair stems from, among other things, his having seen "good and thoughtful Jewish children, bearers of mute words and dreams, walking into darkness before being consumed by the flames" (*ARS* p. 78). In many ways, an endurance of the Holocaust required an escape on the part of its victims into a fantastic state of mind that deleted the present suffering from their memory, even though slipping into a false dream world only masked it temporarily. Individual dreams were turned into a shared nightmare, marking the beginning, as will be later discussed here, of a world pitched in black.

The Reversal of the Role of Parent and Child

In Night, Elie Wiesel gives profound insight into the psychological effects that the Holocaust has on its victims. Using this narrative technique, Wiesel is able to reveal to readers a more poignant aspect of the human dimension of the suffering that occurred that few historical texts would touch upon. One of the most prominent effects of the Nazi death camps was the marked role reversal that occurred between Jewish parents and their children. In Legacy of Night: The Literary Universe of Elie Wiesel, Ellen S. Fine describes this as "...the transformation of the once-powerful paternal authority into a weak, fearful child and that of the dependent child into an adult" (*LN* p. 21). Elie Wiesel's will to survive, and his father's struggle to maintain a strong solidarity between them, is reflected by both of their efforts to remain united with each other throughout the ordeal. Fine writes

> Father and son struggle to remain human, acting as lifelines for each other. They fight to keep alive by mutual care and manage to create a strong bond between them in the most extreme of circumstances. (*LN* p. 18)

Rather than solely look to his father for any last remnants of hope for himself, Wiesel instead reciprocated this support to him, bearing the weight of his father, both literally and figuratively, for the duration of their time together in the camps. By the time his father has reached his death shortly before the final liberation, Wiesel has fully moved into a position of independence relative to his own father, who has become as powerless and dependent upon Wiesel for his own sustenance as a helpless infant.

The reversal of the roles of parent and child during the Holocaust was not limited to the alteration of the relationship between father and son. Crammed into a single

boxcar as anonymously as a herd of cattle, Wiesel tells the story of a woman named Madame Schachter who was the first to crumble visibly under the pressure of the deportation and impending doom. Often she would cry hysterically and motion towards the window at an imaginary vision of a fire in whose place others only saw a vast darkness. Yet, what struck Wiesel most was not the terror felt in her screams, but the sight of her youngest son attempting to calm her. Wiesel writes: "Her little boy was crying, hanging onto her skirt, trying to take hold of her hands. 'It's all right, Mummy! There's nothing there...Sit down...'" (*N* p. 23). Though a mere ten years old, the circumstances of the deportation had forced a maturity upon the little boy that moves him to try to lay calming hands on a woman of fifty, *his mother*, she who had thus far nurtured him who had now been rendered helpless. But when the Jews finally arrived at Auschwitz, they made a frightening discovery: following the outstretched arm of Madame Schachter, there fell upon their gaze the sight of a large chimney, spouting flames into the night. Wiesel remembers "...an abominable odor floating in the air" (*N* p. 25). The prisoners are herded out of the wagon greeted by the smell and vision of death that would become all too familiar. "In front of us flames. In the air that smell of burning flesh" (*N* p. 26), Wiesel observes, marking the start of the height of terror to come.

In one of the most emotionally moving scenes in Night, Wiesel describes the moment in which he is unknowingly separated from his mother and sister for the final time. Left alone with his father, Wiesel found that the desire that he had to latch onto anything that could provide comfort to him only increased. Fine writes that Wiesel "...becomes obsessed with the need to hold on tightly to his father's hand, the only object

of life in a universe where every moment holds the possibility of death" (*LN* p. 18). An officer barks out the order "Men to the left! Women to the right!" (*N* p. 27), and in this instant, a searing indication of the despair that awaits is coldly given. Wiesel says

> Eight words spoken quietly, indifferently, without emotion. Eight short, simple words. Yet that was the moment when I parted from my mother. I had not had time to think, but already I felt the pressure of my father's hand: we were alone. For a part of a second I glimpsed my mother and my sisters moving away to the right. Tzipora held Mother's hand. I saw them disappear into the distance; my mother was stroking my sister's fair hair, as though to protect her, while I walked on with my father and the other men. And I did not know that in that place, at that moment, I was parting from my mother and Tzipora forever. I went on walking. My father held onto my hand. (*N* p. 27)

Even more cruel is that which snaps Wiesel out of this moment: it is the sound of a man falling behind him, and the sight of an SS officer returning his gun to his holster. Wiesel recreates for the reader the shock of the sudden loss of the stable life of his childhood that he has known. It is dealt him so suddenly, and without remorse, that we can only expect that the trauma that will result will set in with such a vengeance as to choke off any ability to feel that he has left in his soul. But was Wiesel prepared for this moment? Had he not said, upon stepping out of the wagon that "The cherished objects we had brought with us thus far were left behind in the train, and with them, at last, our illusions" (*N* p. 27)? Despite this recognition, in no part of his story, and continuing even to the present day, does Wiesel ever finally learn to accept this undeserved inhumanity. He, like the rest of his Jewish comrades, is early on left with little reason to cling to a sense of hope

for relief of his suffering. He is barely into the concentration camp before he is forced to endure a mental blow so severe, that he is rendered irreversibly weary from here until the end.

Until the death of his father, Wiesel fiercely protected their union as they moved from camp to camp, particularly as his father grew progressively weaker and unable to fend effectively for his own well-being. For Wiesel, to be separated from his father would be the equivalent of death. Fine writes "These brief moments of solidarity disrupt the machinery of destruction and prove to be examples of human resistance in the face of the inhuman" (*LN* p. 20). A few days after their arrival in Gleiwitz, the prisoners are arranged into lines for a selection, where the SS officers proceed to eliminate the weak who are marked for death, while retaining the strong to continue on to another sinister fate. When his father is ordered to the left, to the gas chamber, Wiesel immediately breaks after him. He writes

> I slipped in among the others. Several SS rushed to bring me back, creating such confusion that many of the people from the left were able to come back to the right—and among them, my father and myself. However, there were some shots and some dead. (*N* p. 91)

Though, sadly, others were sacrificed in order that Wiesel and his father might be together, still virtually no remorse weighed on Wiesel's conscience, for there was no time to consider the implications of his hasty act. As his father moved blankly forward to meet his grim fate, Wiesel refused to allow him to meet his end. Thus, Wiesel sprang forth in a furious effort to save his father's life, driven by a willingness to do so at any cost.

During their long journey to Buchenwald, Wiesel is confronted by the disturbing possibility that his father may not live with him through the horror of the Holocaust. As the train approaches its stop, Wiesel gazes down at his father who is inert. At the sight of his father's still figure, Wiesel says, "My mind was invaded suddenly by this realization—there was no more reason to live, no more reason to struggle" (*N* p. 93). Yet, again Wiesel refuses to allow his father to die in this moment, and he assumes the role of the paternal authority in taking it upon himself essentially to bring his father back to life. No sooner than the order is given by the SS to throw all corpses on the train outside does the threat of his father being among those taken for dead and discarded become real, and Wiesel promptly sets to work in an attempt to revive this dying patriarch. Wiesel recalls: "I woke from my apathy just at the moment when two men came up to my father. I threw myself on top of his body. He was cold. I slapped him" (*N* p.94). As the two gravediggers reach down to carry his father's "corpse" away, Wiesel writes:

> I set to work to slap him as hard as I could. After a moment my father's eyelids moved slightly over his glazed eyes. He was breathing weakly. 'You see,' I cried. The two men moved away. (*N* p. 94)

Wiesel recounts that over twenty bodies had been carelessly cast off their wagon, and as the train started again, he watched as a few hundred dead faded off into the distance. They were naked, put to rest without ceremony, lying in a snowy field in Poland. It is unclear whether or not some of those removed may have still been alive. But what mattered is that his father was not to be among them that day.

Despite all of Wiesel's weary efforts to wrestle his father from death's grip, Wiesel becomes overwhelmed with a disappointment in his father's gradually decreasing resolve to stay alive. Exhausted by a profound lack of sleep, and barely able to stand, Wiesel's father collapses with fatigue in order to satisfy his pressing desire to simply lie down. Pleading for mercy from his own son, Wiesel's father begs of him to leave him to rest, even if it means that he will not awaken from his slumber. To this, Wiesel angrily admits: "I could have wept with rage. Having lived through so much, suffered so much, could I leave my father to die now?" (*N* p. 100). With a voice of authority, Wiesel screams at his father to gather his strength, and fight this self-murder. Wiesel repeats their dialogue here:

> Father! I screamed. 'Father! Get up from here! Immediately! You're killing yourself...' I seized him by the arm. He continued to groan. 'Don't shout, son...Take pity on your old father...Leave me to rest here...Just for a bit, I'm so tired...at the end of my strength...' *He had become like a child, weak, timid, vulnerable*. 'Father,' I said. 'You can't stay here.' I showed him the corpses all around him; they too had wanted to rest here. (*N* p. 100, *emphasis mine*)

Frightened by the prospect of watching his father die before his eyes choked by fatigue, he negotiates with his father until he relents. Yet, even in this moment, Wiesel feels himself beginning to be caught in a conflicting desire at once to protect his father and rescue him from death, and at the same time to succumb to his own fatigue, and abandon him without a trace. In searching for his father the following morning, Wiesel admits that he thought

> Don't let me find him! If only I could get rid of this dead weight, so that I could use all my strength to struggle for my own survival, and only worry about myself. Immediately I felt ashamed of myself, ashamed forever. (*N* p. 101)

This moment marks a turning point in Wiesel's relationship with his father, for though he remains acutely affected by his father's pain, this secret thought also reveals the beginning of the process of Wiesel's becoming profoundly desensitized to his own father's suffering.

As the days of his father's life begin to be fewer in number, Wiesel watches his father slowly die from the ravages of dysentery. Wiesel gazes upon his father, but this time, without hope that he will evade death. Too weak to ward off attackers, his father spends a week in the hospital being constantly abused by his neighbors, who rob him of his ration of bread and strike him in resentment of his inability to even relieve himself outside. Wiesel's father spends his last days begging his son for food, water, and relief. Though vowing never to leave him, Wiesel is nonetheless overcome by a fear of being punished by the officers who dealt his father vicious blows for failing to remain quiet as he mumbled his final requests. In response to his father being dealt a blow by an officer, Wiesel says, "I did not move. I was afraid. My body was afraid of also receiving a blow. Then my father made a rattling noise and it was my name: 'Eliezer'" (*N* p. 106). Wiesel remained motionless at hearing what would be his father's final utterance. He gives a poignant account of his father's last night of life:

> Bending over him, I stayed gazing at him for over an hour, engraving into myself the picture of his blood-stained face, his shattered skull. Then I had to go to bed. I climbed into my bunk, above my father, who was still alive. It was January 28,

> 1945. I awoke on January 29 at dawn. In my father's place lay another invalid. They must have taken him away before dawn and carried him to the crematory. He may still have been breathing. There were no prayers at his grave. No candles were lit to his memory. His last word was my name. A summons, to which I did not respond. (*N* p. 106)

Wiesel concedes that he has run out of tears, and this pains him greatly. Yet, he admits to feeling a peculiar sense of freedom at the loss of his father. The effort to keep him alive throughout the ordeal was so taxing on Wiesel that he is left without the strength to even properly acknowledge that his father is gone for good. In his memoirs All Rivers Run To The Sea, Wiesel remembers his father's death as "the darkest day of my life, a day heavy with meaning" (*ARS* p. 93). Like a parent who exhibits a fierce love for their child, Wiesel acknowledges that he would have willingly given his own life to spare his father's, but, in a symbolic separation of his once shared plight with his father, he concludes that his time to die had not yet come.

The hopelessness of their circumstances and their fierce desire to stay together had, for a length of time, only served to strengthen the reciprocal support that Wiesel and his father provided to one another. Yet, the transformation that we see in Wiesel's character as the tale progresses, the nature of life in the camps, and the mentality of survival at any cost that these conditions induce, results in a virtual breakdown of the relationship between all fathers and sons. Under what Fine refers to as the "concentration camp philosophy," or "The Nazi technique of attempting to eradicate all family ties and creating a state of mind in which men view each other as enemies or strangers..." (*LN* p. 21), fathers and sons move from a competition for survival between their fellow prisoners

at large to one that pits them primarily against each other. Early in his account, Wiesel relates a story so touching that I acknowledge it as the single moment in his autobiography that, by itself, ultimately moved me to embark on my attempt to gain a fuller understanding of the magnitude of the Jewish Holocaust. One morning Wiesel and his father receive disturbing news from Bela Katz, a neighbor in their town who had arrived at Birkenau shortly before them. The story of Bela Katz is one that we can never forget: "...having been chosen for his strength, he had himself put his father's body into the crematory oven" (*N* p. 33). Forced by the Nazis to abandon his father, Bela Katz is made to subject his father to death at the hands of his own son. Wiesel includes this moment to illustrate the irony of a rather crude parent and child role reversal: though sons bury their fathers in life, they do not usually do so literally, when their fathers are young, and with ovens as their final resting places. And again, before this news is allowed to be absorbed by Wiesel and his father, he is snapped out of his reverie as "Blows continued to rain down" (*N* p. 33). In Auschwitz, human dignity has no place. The identity of an individual is reduced to a non-entity. There is no time to feel, or room to comprehend, why this curse has been laid upon the Jews. They have had their own best faculties turned against them, as illustrated by this ironic use of strength to essentially inflict a degree of pain, in this case of a psychological nature, upon oneself. And they are made to accept this forced defeat, for disobedience would only bring them to their end.

During the march from Buna to Gleiwitz, Wiesel remembers the appearance of Rabbi Eliahou, a well-respected community leader who retained his ability to dispense words of comfort even in the face of evil. After managing to stay together for three years, from camp to camp, through numerous selections, and after much pain, suffering,

and prayer, Rabbi Eliahou enters the shed in which the prisoners rested searching for his son. Rabbi Eliahou explains that sometime during their journey, he ran out of strength to run, and his son presumably lost sight of him and kept on. After confirming that his son's whereabouts were unknown by anyone, Wiesel suddenly remembers that he had, indeed, seen Rabbi Eliahou's son and had simply forgotten to tell him, but, in remembering this, he also has another frightening recollection:

> Then I remembered something else: his son had seen him losing ground, limping, staggering back to the rear of the column. He had seen him. And he had continued to run on in front, letting the distance between them grow greater. (*N* p. 87)

After years of maintaining their solidarity with one another, father and son are finally separated by a fear of one infringing upon the life chances of the other. Wiesel is dismayed when he realizes that Rabbi Eliahou's son has cast off his father for being a burden to his own chances of survival. In response to this, Wiesel is immediately moved to pray that he would never do as Rabbi Eliahou's son had done.

Where the breakdown of many of the father and son relationships illustrated in Night could be attributed to the development of a competition for survival between the parent and child, in only a few devastating instances does the child actually take an active role in the snatching of his father's life. In the final phase of the journey to Buchenwald, a crowd of spectators who had gathered along the sides of the trains begin to amuse themselves by throwing rations of bread into the wagons, watching with delight as the starving men fought each other to the death for a crumb. One weak old man who had dragged himself on all fours to get a piece of the bread proceeds to lift the morsel to his

mouth when he is suddenly overcome by a series of blows raining down upon him by one who attempted to steal his ration. The words that issued forth from the mouth of the man echoed eerily throughout the train:

> 'Meir. Meir, my boy! Don't you recognize me? I'm your father...you're hurting me...you're killing your father! I've got some bread...for you too...for you too...' He collapsed. His fist was still clenched around a small piece. He tried to carry it to his mouth. But the other one threw himself upon him and snatched it. The old man again whispered something, let out a rattle, and died amid the general indifference. His son searched him, took the bread, and began to devour it. He was not able to get very far. Two men had seen and hurled themselves upon him. Others joined in. When they withdrew, next to me were two corpses, side by side, the father and the son. (*N* p. 96)

Ironically, Wiesel offers no response to witnessing this complete and utter breakdown of the family bond. His silence in this moment further underscores the impact that such a sight has on his emotional state. Whether overcome by indifference of his own, or overwhelmed with horror, he is stunned into silence, and can only remark on how, at fifteen, he has seen so much devastation, at such a tender age.

And the World was Without Light

The procession of Jews out of their undisturbed community and into chaos marked what Wiesel refers to in From the Kingdom of Memory: Reminiscences as a "Pilgrimage to the Kingdom of Night." According to Wiesel's description, each concentration camp can be regarded as representing a larger "...kingdom of night, where God's face is hidden and a flaming sky becomes a graveyard for a vanished people" (*KM*

p. 105). Wiesel's emphasis on the coming of each night effectively illustrates the nature of the brutally miserable Holocaust circumstance. As Ellen S. Fine concludes in Legacy of Night, "Wiesel uses the word *Night* throughout his writing to denote this strange sphere, unreal and unimaginable in its otherworldliness" (*LN* p. 11). The metaphor of the night symbolizes the lack of meaning that characterizes this tragedy, as all justifications for this crime of genocide are left precisely in the dark—that is—profoundly unexplained.

In Night, the passing of time is marked by Wiesel's announcement throughout his account of the coming of dawn and the "falling" of night as each day unfolded. The night signals a period of inactivity for the prisoners, and serves as a metaphor for the curtain of the living world that closes on the lives of masses of Jews upon each twilight. Early in his account, Wiesel begins to frame the coming of night as a veritable shadow that is cast over his otherwise stable Jewish community. As Ellen S. Fine notes, night was "...the time for prayer, interrogation and dialogue within the context of the secure and the traditional" (*LN* p. 12). The concept of night is first associated with the evening gatherings of the Jews during which they discussed their impending expulsion. It is during one of these gatherings that the Jews of Wiesel's village have their meeting abruptly interrupted by a Jewish policeman who brings news of their deportation. After this moment, Wiesel spends the remainder of his account illustrating the ways in which the passing of time seems to speed up, eventually running out on their hopes. Wiesel writes, "Night. No one prayed, so that the night would pass quickly" (*N* p. 18). In these moments, even the traditional pattern of nightly reverence to God was temporarily put aside as people simply turned their focus to surviving the uncertainty of the evening. The

falling of night no longer brought with it the closure of day, but rather became fraught with the anxieties of the Jews whose rest was forsaken as they pondered what fate awaited them once the sun penetrated the darkness to show her face again.

After the inevitable arrival at Auschwitz and his recounting of the episode of Madame Schachter having gone mad, Wiesel remembers he and his comrades looking out the window and seeing only "flames in the darkness" (*N* p. 25). The light of these flames punctuating the darkness can be interpreted as a crude representation of the only "rays" of hope that are present in the camps. Fire becomes one of the dominating motifs of Wiesel's autobiography, for the rising sun brings with it a new day of death for many in the fiery pits and crematories of this hell on earth. Indeed, and as Fine also notes, the greatest irony of the term "Holocaust" itself is that it signifies the destruction of a people on a catastrophic scale, with human beings becoming living sacrifices for the perpetuation of evil.

As Wiesel moves from camp to camp, he uses the concept of night to speak of each journey in terms of finality. The night marks his transport from one place in time to the next. When the time comes for Wiesel and his father to be evacuated with the rest of the camp from Buna, where they had been sent as part of a work transport, Wiesel writes

> The last night in Buna. Yet another last night. The last night at home, the last night in the ghetto, the last night in the train, and, now, the last night in Buna. How much longer were our lives to be dragged out from one 'last night' to another? (*N* p. 79)

Wiesel's preoccupation with the night as marking the transition from one circumstance to another is a poignant demonstration of the ways in which hope itself rose and fell in the

minds of the Jewish prisoners. For the Jews in the concentration camps, not only did each night mark the end of a particular phase in their journey, but it also held the possibility of marking the end of their life on earth. The prisoners are made to wait until six o'clock the following evening for the march to begin. At the sound of the bell ordering the men in rows, Wiesel, seemingly right on cue, fittingly says "Night had fallen" (*N* p. 80). And so the men rose to step in time to the beat of the death knell. As they moved forward through the gates, Wiesel remarks "It seemed that an even darker night was waiting for us on the other side" (*N* p. 80). Wiesel's references to night are clearly used to symbolize the impending fate and threatened life chances of Jews, and serves as an indication of the keen awareness on the part of Jews of their grim circumstance.

In the midst of the Holocaust experience, Wiesel notes early in his autobiography how Jewish parents, remarkably, still urged their children to hang on to the hope for deliverance from these trials of abuse, to cling to the promise of what might be. They said to their children "You must never lose faith, even when the sword hangs over your head" (*N* p. 29). This proved a difficult task, as faith was routinely replaced by the expectancy of death, and the constant concern on the part of all to remain together with their loved ones. There was always the possibility of permanent separation, and every time Wiesel and his father escaped such a fate, Wiesel acknowledges feeling "A weight...lifted from my heart" (*N* p. 29). More disturbing was the constant fear of finding oneself before the fiery pit of death, of narrowly escaping death's grip. Throughout his story, Wiesel draws upon the metaphor of the dark image of night to emphasize the passing away of time, hope, and life for the Jewish prisoners of the

concentration camps. Once, on being turned away from his first realistic view of what became many prisoners' fiery farewell to the world, Wiesel writes

> Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky. Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever. Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never. (*N* p. 32)

Wiesel employs an effective use of literary repetition to emphasize the extent to which the shadow of night is cloaked over the lives and dreams of all who are imprisoned in the camps. The first night in camp for Wiesel has enormous significance because it signals the conclusion of a day in which he has been ripped out of the peace of his childhood, seen his mother and sisters for the last time, witnessed the indifferent murder of many of his comrades, and marched before the face of death himself, hand in hand with his father, turned away just seconds before the flames are allowed to leap up and consume him. As well, in Fine's interpretation, Wiesel's soliloquy "marks his initiation into one long and never-ending night and commits him to remember it always" (*LN* p. 15). This day was a turning point in his life because he acknowledges his complete loss of faith—in a God who he believes looks down on this terror from "a silent blue sky," and in the hope for an end to his suffering, for all promise is reduced to ashes. In Elie Wiesel: Between

Memory and Hope, Lea Hamaoui summarizes Wiesel's thoughts as "an oath never to forget this night of his arrival" and further as an "elaborate oath of remembrance" (p. 127). Wiesel enters into a kingdom of night where time is made to stand still. He expresses his rejection of his grim fate by vowing to never forget his experience. While left unrecorded in a record of history, in Wiesel's account, those moments in the Holocaust when its victims made a silent covenant with themselves and other survivors to never forsake the memory or meaning of this period in history are profoundly revealed. Unlike in a plain record of history, Wiesel portrays the Jewish prisoners not as passive victims, but as a thriving people who actively sought to rebel against their tragic fate, here in the form of committing themselves, should they survive, to be witnesses to this horror for the rest of the world.

In his daily walk along the threshold of death, Wiesel often spoke of the deadening of his spirit, and how an overwhelming fatigue infringed upon his motivation to continue to fight for his survival. Once, near the end of his tale, Wiesel remarks on how "The night was long and never ending" (p. 93). Interestingly, Wiesel is not referring to one specific evening in time, but instead uses the term "night" to symbolize his entire ordeal. The Holocaust is arguably the darkest period in Jewish history, for it is a tragic event marked by death, where a fate was bestowed upon an entire people that will, perhaps, forever remain unexplained. Thus, he appropriately names his autobiography *Night* in order to frame his story as one that, while containing an account of events from the past, still resonates in meaning to the present, and will always. Every generation of humankind hereafter bears the responsibility for remembering the victims of the Holocaust, so that the memory of every individual will never be left behind.

On Memory: We Must Leave No One Behind

As voices of the past, Richard Wright and Elie Wiesel narrate the stories of their lives in a way that effectively demonstrates the power of literature to serve as a social record of history. Their autobiographies are especially significant because they are each a powerful monument to two dramatic periods in history to which they were witness: the racial oppression of black Americans in the Jim Crow South, and the religious persecution and ethnic genocide of Jews in Europe. Black Boy and Night are moving testimonies of the survivor, of those who speak from the vantage point of ones who have lived through these moments. Their poignant, and at times fascinating, portrayal of physical and social suffering illustrate the ways in which literature and history have an impact upon one another.

By providing a literary account of their life stories from a first-person perspective, both ironically narrated through the innocent eyes of a child, Wright and Wiesel make their experiences more immediate to the reader than a mere reading of historical text. Each has succeeded in bringing their audience to a fuller, though by no means complete, understanding of the enormity and significance of these events such that it is difficult to forget these moments. By breaking free of socially and psychologically imposed silence, Wright and Wiesel have established themselves as two of humankind's greatest voices in history.

The ways in which Wright's Black Boy and Elie Wiesel's Night have influenced the way in which history is remembered cannot be underestimated. Wright and Wiesel use the medium of literature, and its characteristic forms of expression, including the use of dramatic imagery, metaphors, and symbols of the larger meaning of their respective

existences, to re-work the imaginative world in which they wrote, while making an enormous contribution to humankind's record of history. Most significant, and perhaps most meaningful, is that, through the power of memory, Wright and Wiesel pay homage to those who either suffered through these moments in history never finding a voice, or who were consumed by these moments of terror, and who did not survive to share their experiences with the world so that all of humanity could learn from the mistakes of the past and ensure that they are not lived by any human again. Wright and Wiesel provide a voice for their fellow man, for those who lived and those who perished, to ensure that the memory of none is left behind.

Works Consulted

Adler, Jerry. "Auschwitz." Newsweek (January 1995): 46-57.

Andrews, William L. "Richard Wright and the African-American Autobiography Tradition." Style 27 (Summer 1993): 271-282.

Bone, Robert. Richard Wright. Minneapolis: Jones Press, University of Minnesota, 1969.

Brignano, Russell Carl. Richard Wright: An Introduction to the Man and His Works. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970.

Brown, Robert McAfee. Elie Wiesel: Messenger to All Humanity. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983.

Fabre, Michael. The World of Richard Wright. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1985.

Felgar, Robert. Understanding Richard Wright's Black Boy: A Student Casebook To Issues, Sources, And Historical Documents. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1998.

Fine, Ellen S. Legacy of Night: The Literary Universe of Elie Wiesel. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982.

Fishburn, Katherine. Richard Wright's Hero: The Faces of a Rebel-Victim. Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1977.

Gounard, Jean-Francois and Joseph J. Rodgers Jr., *translator*. The Racial Problem in the Works of Richard Wright and James Baldwin. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1992.

Hakutani, Yoshinobu. Richard Wright and Racial Discourse. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996.

Kinnamon, Keneth. The Emergence of Richard Wright: A Study in Literature and Society. Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1972.

Macksey, Richard and Frank E. Moorer, eds. Richard Wright: A Collection of Critical Essays. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1984.

Margolies, Edward. The Art of Richard Wright. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969.

Rittner, Carol, ed. Elie Wiesel: Between Memory and Hope. New York: New York University Press, 1990.

Rosenfeld, Alvin H. and Irving Greenberg, eds. Confronting the Holocaust: The Impact of Elie Wiesel. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978.

Schuster, Ekkehard and Reinhold Boschert-Kimmig. Hope Against Hope: Johann Baptist Metz and Elie Wiesel Speak Out on the Holocaust. New York: Paulist Press, Inc., 1999.

Webb, Constance. Richard Wright: A Biography. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1968.

Wiesel, Elie. All Rivers Run To The Sea: Memoirs. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995.

Wiesel, Elie. From the Kingdom of Memory: Reminiscences. New York: Summit Books, 1990.

Wiesel, Elie. Night. New York: Hill & Wang, 1960.

Wiesel, Elie. "'Stay Together, Always.'" Newsweek (January 1995): 58-59.

Wright, Richard. Black Boy. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1937.