

Critical Essay: Wiesel and the Critics

In characterizing the focus of his work, Wiesel is perhaps his most dogged critic. Unwilling to laud himself as a touchstone of modern documentary journalism and a prime mover in the establishment of Holocaust lore as a unique wing of twentieth-century literature, he thinks of himself as a modest witness rather than moralist, theologian, or sage. In *One Generation After*, he accounts for his method and purpose: "I write in order to understand as much as to be understood." The most prominent of his early writings — the impressionistic trilogy composed of *Night*, *Dawn* (1961), and *The Accident* (1962) — reports Third Reich savagery with a controlled passion. Fifteen years after the fall of concentration camps, he battled repeated rejections before publishing in 1960 with Hill & Wang the first English version of the trio, translated by Stella Rodway.

In the canon of war literature, *Night* holds a unique position among works that differentiate between the challenge to the warrior and the sufferings of the noncombatant. A terse, merciless testimonial, the book serves as an austere reflection on war that has been characterized as "pure as a police report." Some analysts view the work as allegory in its depiction of the devastating effect of evil on innocence; critic Lawrence Cunningham labels the work a "thanatography."

Although *Night* earned the author a pro forma advance of only \$100 and sold only 1,046 copies its first eighteen months, three and a half decades later, *Night* has achieved the status of a nonfiction classic. Alongside Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl*, Corrie ten Boom's *The Hiding Place*, and Thomas Keneally's *Schindler's List*, Wiesel's memoir forms one of the cornerstones of Holocaust reportage.

In the decade following Wiesel's introduction of a verboten topic, few people — even outraged Jews — clamored to hear his grisly, heart-rending narrative, which he typifies as "the truth of a mad-man." However, critics began reexamining the contribution of Wiesel's shared memoir and elevated the brief nightmarish narrative to the level of a twentieth-century jeremiad:

- For the work's graphic recall of an imponderably monstrous scenario, critic Robert Alter compares Wiesel to Dante, the visionary author who traverses Hell in his *Inferno*.
- Daniel Stern, reviewing for the *Nation*, proclaims the book "the single most powerful literary relic of the Holocaust."
- Lothar Kahn compares Wiesel to an Old Testament prophet and draws a parallel between Wiesel's restless travels and the ceaseless journey of the mythic Wandering Jew, who is said to live forever in spiritual torment.
- Josephine Knopp pairs Wiesel's questioning of God with the biblical rebellions of Abraham, Moses, and Jeremiah.

Subsequent works by Wiesel maintain his attempt to inspire moral activism and his fear that future generations will forget the lessons of history or turn their backs on preventable horrors.

At the pivotal point in Wiesel's career, he was transformed from a spare, insecure after-dinner speaker to America's Holocaust superstar. Awards continue to pour in from B'nai B'rith, the American Jewish Committee, the State of Israel, Artists and Writers for Peace in the Middle East, the Christopher Foundation, and the International Human Rights Law Group. Foundations have established honorariums for humanitarian Holocaust research and Judaica at the University of Haifa, Bar-Ilan University, and the universities of Denver and Florida.

Out of respect for Wiesel's anguished past and his dedication to human rights issues, literary critics temper reviews with a gentled, but pointed rebuttal. In private, their anonymous sneers ring with the intellectual's cynicism. Against the deluge of popular response, their quarrel with Wiesel's lengthy canon is the repetition of Holocaust themes, especially the guilt that the survivor feels for remaining alive through the whims of fate while more pious or scholarly victims died. Some critics denounce Wiesel's obsession with genocide and his belief that God abandoned Jews, who consider themselves a chosen race:

- In 1987, Lawrence L. Langer of the *Washington Post* commented wryly that Wiesel claimed to be finished with the Holocaust, but "the Holocaust has not yet finished with him." Langer added that the author "returns compulsively to the ruins of the Holocaust world."
- Martin Peretz, editor of *The New Republic*, considers Wiesel a public joke and a misapplication of the dignified Nobel Peace Prize.
- *New York Times* reviewer Edward Grossman has accused Wiesel of pursuing a "forced march from despair to affirmation."
- Irving Howe declares in *The New Republic* that Wiesel is a publicity seeker; Alfred Kazin augments the charge with claims that the famed death camp survivor is both shallow and self-aggrandizing.
- Jeffrey Burke of the *New York Times Book Review* carries denunciation to greater extremes by lambasting Wiesel for redundancy and purple prose. Such strong dissent impels Wiesel to unburden his conscience and to master the same objectivity in memoir that he demands of his newspaper reportage.