



READING 6 Understand, make inferences and draw conclusions about the varied structural patterns and features of literary nonfiction. **RC-12(A)** Reflect on understanding to monitor comprehension.

from *Night*

Memoir by Elie Wiesel

Meet the Author

Elie Wiesel born 1928

British Prime Minister Winston Churchill described Nazi Germany as “the foulest and most soul-destroying tyranny which has ever darkened and stained the pages of history.” Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel’s memoir *Night* provided the world with a harrowing firsthand account of the soul-destroying tactics used by the Nazis in their attempt to eradicate European Jews.

A Family Torn Apart Wiesel was born in Sighet (sē’gĕt), a town in the Romanian region of Transylvania. Raised as a devout Orthodox Jew, Wiesel was just 15 in the spring of 1944 when the Nazis ordered the deportation of Sighet’s 15,000 Jews, shipping them out on a cattle train to the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp in Poland. Wiesel’s mother and one of his three sisters were murdered at Auschwitz. Separated from the women in the family, Wiesel and his father were eventually sent to the Buchenwald concentration camp in Germany, where Wiesel’s father died of starvation and dysentery shortly before the camp was liberated in April 1945.

Bearing Witness After Wiesel was freed, he remained silent about the Holocaust for ten years, writing nothing about his experiences even

though he worked as a journalist and writer. “I didn’t want to use the wrong words,” he later explained. Wiesel’s first attempt at writing about the Holocaust was an 800-page autobiographical account in Yiddish, the language of his childhood. He then wrote a French version of the account, condensed to just over 100 pages, which was published as *La Nuit* in 1958 and as *Night* in English two years later. Historian Daniel Stern described the book as “the single most powerful literary relic of the Holocaust.” Wiesel has worked tirelessly to call attention to human rights violations around the world, winning the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts.

Into the Night The excerpt that follows begins as the Jews of Sighet are huddled in a filthy cattle train bound for Auschwitz-Birkenau, where eventually some 2 million Jews would be killed in gas chambers or shot by firing squads. Others, who were forced to work as slaves, died of torture, starvation, exhaustion, and disease. Tragically, the Jews of Sighet had earlier been warned of Nazi atrocities by a man passing through the town who told them to run for their lives. They believed him to be mad, however, and did not heed his warning.

Author Online

Go to thinkcentral.com. KEYWORD: HML12-1280



DID YOU KNOW?

Elie Wiesel ...

- may have been the first person to use the word *Holocaust* to refer to the mass murder carried out by the Nazis.
- co-wrote a memoir with former French president François Mitterrand.
- is fluent in Yiddish, Hebrew, Hungarian, German, French, and English.

LITERARY ANALYSIS: TONE

Tone is the expression of a writer's attitude toward a subject. The tone of nonfiction writing can vary widely; for example, an informational article may be detached and objective, while an opinion piece may be ardent and totally subjective. In this excerpt from *Night*, Wiesel's tone reflects his personal experience of horrific events. As you read, consider the following in determining the memoir's tone:

- the **descriptive details** the writer offers
- the **diction** the writer uses—that is, the **word choices** and **syntax**, or order of words in a sentence

READING STRATEGY: READING A MEMOIR

A **memoir** is a form of autobiographical writing in which a writer shares his or her personal experiences and observations of significant events or people. Memoirs can provide a firsthand account of historical events, allowing us to generalize from an individual's experience to learn about history from a more personal perspective. In Wiesel's memoir *Night*, we view through his eyes the horrors that millions of European Jews experienced in Nazi concentration camps.

As you read Wiesel's memoir, think about which of his personal experiences would have been very similar for most Jews captured by the Nazis. Consider what you already know about the Holocaust and what you learn from Wiesel: are you able to make any generalizations about this historical event? Using a chart like the one shown, write down the specific details from Wiesel's personal experiences that help you arrive at historical generalizations.

<i>Wiesel's Experience</i>	<i>Generalization</i>
"If anyone goes missing, you will all be shot, like dogs."	Jewish prisoners were threatened and treated like animals.



Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

Why must we never FORGET?

Elie Wiesel once said that the Holocaust is a tragedy "beyond words and beyond imagination, but not beyond memory." Because of the efforts of survivors like Wiesel and of other human rights activists, countless books, films, memorials, and museums have been created over the years to remember and honor the victims of the Holocaust and to serve as a reminder of one of the most shameful chapters in history.

DISCUSS With a small group of classmates, compile a list of major events from history, noting what we learned from each. Then, share your findings with other groups.

<i>Historic Event</i>	<i>What We Learned</i>
Civil War	A divided nation cannot survive; slavery is inhumane and unacceptable.



Night

Elie Wiesel

BACKGROUND Germany's invasion of Poland in 1939 marked the beginning of World War II. One of Adolf Hitler's goals was to eliminate the Jewish population (whom he blamed for every evil in the world). All across Europe, Jews were rounded up by Hitler's Nazi forces and sent—usually by train—to concentration camps, where many were killed in gas chambers, were executed by firing squads, or died of torture, starvation, or disease. The largest of these death camps was Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland where, it is estimated, more than 2 million people were killed.

The train stopped in Kaschau, a small town on the Czechoslovakian border.¹ We realized then that we were not staying in Hungary. Our eyes opened. Too late.

The door of the car slid aside. A German officer stepped in accompanied by a Hungarian lieutenant, acting as his interpreter.

“From this moment on, you are under the authority of the German army. Anyone who still owns gold, silver, or watches must hand them over now. Anyone who will be found to have kept any of these will be shot on the spot. Secondly, anyone who is ill should report to the hospital car. That’s all.”

The Hungarian lieutenant went around with a basket and retrieved the last
10 possessions from those who chose not to go on tasting the bitterness of fear.

“There are eighty of you in the car,” the German officer added. “If anyone goes missing, you will all be shot, like dogs.” **A**

The two disappeared. The doors clanked shut. We had fallen into the trap, up to our necks. The doors were nailed, the way back irrevocably cut off. The world had become a hermetically² sealed cattle car.

Analyze Visuals ►

How does the background information on this page affect how you think about this photograph?

A MEMOIR

What generalization can you make from Wiesel's experience in lines 9–12?

1. **Czechoslovakian** (chĕk' ə-slə-vă'kē-ən) **border**: the border of the former nation of Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic and Slovakia), occupied by Germany during World War II.

2. **hermetically** (hər-mĕt'ĭ-klē): in an airtight way; thoroughly.

Women and children arrive in freight trains at Auschwitz-Birkenau



There was a woman among us, a certain Mrs. Schächter. She was in her fifties and her ten-year-old son was with her, crouched in a corner. Her husband and two older sons had been deported with the first transport, by mistake. The separation had totally shattered her.

20 I knew her well. A quiet, tense woman with piercing eyes, she had been a frequent guest in our house. Her husband was a pious man who spent most of his days and nights in the house of study. It was she who supported the family.

Mrs. Schächter had lost her mind. On the first day of the journey, she had already begun to moan. She kept asking why she had been separated from her family. Later, her sobs and screams became hysterical.

On the third night, as we were sleeping, some of us sitting, huddled against each other, some of us standing, a piercing cry broke the silence:

“Fire! I see a fire! I see a fire!”

There was a moment of panic. Who had screamed? It was Mrs. Schächter.

30 Standing in the middle of the car, in the faint light filtering through the windows, she looked like a withered tree in a field of wheat. She was howling, pointing through the window: **B**

“Look! Look at this fire! This terrible fire! Have mercy on me!”

Some pressed against the bars to see. There was nothing. Only the darkness of night.

It took us a long time to recover from this harsh awakening. We were still trembling, and with every screech of the wheels, we felt the abyss opening beneath us. Unable to still our anguish, we tried to reassure each other:

“She is mad, poor woman . . .”

40 Someone had placed a damp rag on her forehead. But she nevertheless continued to scream:

“Fire! I see a fire!”

Her little boy was crying, clinging to her skirt, trying to hold her hand:

“It’s nothing, Mother! There’s nothing there . . . Please sit down . . .” He pained me even more than did his mother’s cries.

Some of the women tried to calm her:

“You’ll see, you’ll find your husband and sons again . . . In a few days . . .”

She continued to scream and sob fitfully.

“Jews, listen to me,” she cried. “I see a fire! I see flames, huge flames!”

50 It was as though she were possessed by some evil spirit.

We tried to reason with her, more to calm ourselves, to catch our breath, than to soothe her:

“She is hallucinating because she is thirsty, poor woman . . . That’s why she speaks of flames devouring her . . .”

But it was all in vain. Our terror could no longer be contained. Our nerves had reached a breaking point. Our very skin was aching. It was as though madness had infected all of us. We gave up. A few young men forced her to sit down, then bound and gagged her. **C**

B TONE

Reread the description of Mrs. Schächter. How do Wiesel’s word choices contribute to the general tone of the work?

C MEMOIR

Reread lines 36–58, focusing on the reactions of other passengers to Mrs. Schächter. How did the train ride to Auschwitz affect the prisoners?

Silence fell again. The small boy sat next to his mother, crying. I started to
 60 breathe normally again as I listened to the rhythmic pounding of the wheels on
 the tracks as the train raced through the night. We could begin to doze again,
 to rest, to dream . . .

And so an hour or two passed. Another scream jolted us. The woman had
 broken free of her bonds and was shouting louder than before:

“Look at the fire! Look at the flames! Flames everywhere . . .”

Once again, the young men bound and gagged her. When they actually struck
 her, people shouted their approval:

“Keep her quiet! Make that madwoman shut up. She’s not the only one here . . .”

She received several blows to the head, blows that could have been lethal. Her
 70 son was clinging desperately to her, not uttering a word. He was no longer crying.

The night seemed endless. By daybreak, Mrs. Schächter had settled down.
 Crouching in her corner, her blank gaze fixed on some faraway place, she no
 longer saw us.

She remained like that all day, mute, absent, alone in the midst of us. Toward
 evening she began to shout again:

“The fire, over there!”

She was pointing somewhere in the distance, always the same place. No one
 felt like beating her anymore. The heat, the thirst, the stench, the lack of air, were
 suffocating us. Yet all that was nothing compared to her screams, which tore us
 80 apart. A few more days and all of us would have started to scream. **D**

But we were pulling into a station. Someone near a window read to us:

“Auschwitz.”³

Nobody had ever heard that name.

The train did not move again. The afternoon went by slowly. Then the doors
 of the wagon slid open. Two men were given permission to fetch water.

When they came back, they told us that they had learned, in exchange for a
 gold watch, that this was the final destination. We were to leave the train here.
 There was a labor camp on the site. The conditions were good. Families would
 not be separated. Only the young would work in the factories. The old and the
 90 sick would find work in the fields.

Confidence soared. Suddenly we felt free of the previous nights’ terror. We
 gave thanks to God.

Mrs. Schächter remained huddled in her corner, mute, untouched by the
 optimism around her. Her little one was stroking her hand.

Dusk began to fill the wagon. We ate what was left of our food. At ten o’clock
 in the evening, we were all trying to find a position for a quick nap and soon we
 were dozing. Suddenly:

“Look at the fire! Look at the flames! Over there!”

Language Coach

Synonyms Individual synonyms have shades of meaning, or **nuance**. *Lethal* (line 69) and *fatal*, for example, both mean “deadly,” but *lethal* implies that death is possible, and *fatal* means that death is inevitable. Could *fatal* be used in line 69?

D TONE

What words in lines 74–80 help convey the passengers’ emotional state?

3. **Auschwitz** (oush’vīts’): a town in southern Poland near the site of the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp, where between 1 and 4 million people, mostly Jews from Germany and eastern Europe, were systematically murdered by the Nazis between 1942 and 1945.

With a start, we awoke and rushed to the window yet again. We had believed
100 her, if only for an instant. But there was nothing outside but darkness. We
returned to our places, shame in our souls but fear gnawing at us nevertheless.
As she went on howling, she was struck again. Only with great difficulty did we
succeed in quieting her down.

The man in charge of our wagon called out to a German officer strolling down
the platform, asking him to have the sick woman moved to a hospital car.

“Patience,” the German replied, “patience. She’ll be taken there soon.”

Around eleven o’clock, the train began to move again. We pressed against
the windows. The convoy was rolling slowly. A quarter of an hour later, it
began to slow down even more. Through the windows, we saw barbed wire; we
110 understood that this was the camp.

We had forgotten Mrs. Schächter’s existence. Suddenly there was a terrible
scream:

“Jews, look! Look at the fire! Look at the flames!”


And as the train stopped, this time we saw flames rising from a tall chimney
into a black sky.

Mrs. Schächter had fallen silent on her own. Mute again, indifferent, absent,
she had returned to her corner.

We stared at the flames in the darkness. A wretched stench floated in the air.
Abruptly, our doors opened. Strange-looking creatures, dressed in striped jackets
120 and black pants, jumped into the wagon. Holding flashlights and sticks, they
began to strike at us left and right, shouting:

“Everybody get out! Leave everything inside. Hurry up!” **E**

We jumped out. I glanced at Mrs. Schächter. Her little boy was still holding
her hand.

In front of us, those flames. In the air, the smell of burning flesh. It must have
been around midnight. We had arrived. In Birkenau. 

Translated by Marion Wiesel

E MEMOIR

Lines 107–122 are
Wiesel’s eyewitness
account of arriving
at Auschwitz. What
descriptive details convey
the terror that Jews felt
upon their arrival at the
concentration camps?



READING 6 Understand, make inferences and draw conclusions about the varied structural patterns and features of literary nonfiction. **RC-12(A)** Reflect on understanding to monitor comprehension.

Comprehension

1. **Recall** What are the passengers forced to give up when the German army takes control of the train?
2. **Recall** What do the passengers see when they arrive at Birkenau?
3. **Clarify** What has led to Mrs. Schächter's mental breakdown?

Literary Analysis

4. **Identify Irony** When a character expects one thing to happen but something else actually happens, it is referred to as **situational irony**. Identify an example of situational irony in this excerpt from *Night*.
5. **Analyze Tone** What tone does Wiesel use in his descriptions of Mrs. Schächter and her son?
6. **Examine Writer's Style** Diction, or a writer's choice of words, is a significant component of style. Part of the power of this excerpt from *Night* is the way Wiesel conveys the emotional and psychological states of the passengers in the train car. For each of the following, identify the emotional state he describes and cite the words or phrases he uses to do so.
 - lines 13–15 ("The two disappeared . . . cattle car.")
 - lines 55–57 ("But it was all . . . We gave up.")
 - lines 87–92 ("We were to leave . . . thanks to God.")
7. **Make Judgments About Memoir** Review the chart you completed as you read, and think about both the personal and historical insights Wiesel provides. In your opinion, what would be more valuable to a historian 100 years from now—Wiesel's memoir or a more objective account of events surrounding the Holocaust? Explain.

Literary Criticism

8. **Biographical Context** Elie Wiesel has stated, "I decided to devote my life to telling the story because I felt that having survived I owe something to the dead, and anyone who does not remember betrays them again." What might Wiesel mean when he says he "owes" something to those who lost their lives in the Holocaust? Explain your response.

Why must we never **FORGET?**

What modern catastrophes can be compared—to some degree—to the Holocaust? Try to think of at least two examples. What steps have survivors taken to memorialize those events? What important facts or details have they sought to remember?