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### Literary Merit Of *Night*

When discussing works of “literary merit,” one may think of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* or Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. The AP College Board sets several guidelines when defining literary merit; a literary work must be innovative, artistic enough to stand the test of time, and it must not use clichéd descriptions or plot devices that would demote it to the classification of “pulp” fiction (Dearborn). Although Elie Wiesel’s *Night* has been deemed a classic, it has also been criticized as being more of a testimonial than a work of literature, and in 1964 the critic A. Alvarez called the Holocaust story “a failure as a work of art” (Donadio). Despite these judgements, *Night* does meet several of the College Board’s criteria for having literary merit: it entertains the reader, shows thematic depth, and has an ideological impact on society (Dearborn). Elie Wiesel’s work has therefore, through its powerful use of literary and stylistic devices, earned its place on every AP English Literature teacher’s bookshelf.

*Night* goes above and beyond the College Board’s statement that a work of literary merit must be entertaining and interesting to the reader (Dearborn), and to simply refer to the novel in this way would be an understatement. Wiesel uses imagery as a prime literary element in *Night* to engage the reader, which in turn enhances the novel’s entertainment value. Perhaps one of the

most haunting images in the entire novel is that of the dying man crawling to reach the two cauldrons of soup: “a man appeared, crawling snakelike in the direction of the cauldrons...he let out a terrible scream, a death rattle such as I had never heard before and, with open mouth, thrust his head toward the still steaming liquid...the man writhed a few seconds at the base of the cauldron, and then he was still” (59-60, Wiesel). Although disturbing details such as this one make Wiesel’s story a hard one to read, these gruesome images of the Holocaust are what make *Night* a compelling must-read for any literature student.

Another factor in the compellingness of *Night* is its demonstration of thematic depth. By highlighting themes of humanity, religion, and violence, Wiesel forces the reader to ask the question: is there a God, and if so, where was He during the Holocaust? Wiesel’s struggle with his faith is the driving force in the story behind this question, and after witnessing the atrocities of the Holocaust his faith in God is irreparably damaged. The cruelty and horror he experiences in the concentration camp destroys Wiesel’s innocence and his belief in a just God, as seen in chapter three: “Never shall I forget that night, the first night in the camp, that turned my life into one long night seven times sealed...never shall I forget those things, even were I condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never” (Wiesel 34). The somber and mournful tone of this passage is reflected throughout the novel, and Wiesel uses this tone to convey the novel’s themes. Wiesel also uses fire to symbolize the Nazi’s cruel power and night to symbolize a world without God. Each of these devices serve to deepen the novel’s themes and thus prove its literary merit.

In 1986, Elie Wiesel won the Nobel Peace Prize for his work as a “messenger to mankind” (Donadio). Through “teaching ‘peace, atonement and human dignity,’” (Donadio) *Night* meets another of the AP College Board’s requirements for literary fiction: it has an

ideological impact on society (Dearborn). Over the years, *Night* has become as essential to the canon of Holocaust stories as *The Diary of Anne Frank*. What makes the story so powerful is Wiesel's honesty. He doesn't avoid telling the reader that at times he feels his father is a burden or that he went to bed while his father died alone; rather he is reflective about these experiences and conveys genuine guilt and shame. By expressing these feelings, Wiesel shows how time spent in the concentration camps brought out the worst in people and emphasizes to the reader that something like the Holocaust should never be permitted to happen again. Wiesel also emphasizes this point by never answering the question of God's role in the Holocaust, and in doing so does not allow the reader to pretend that the Holocaust was not anything other than the atrocity that it was. By leaving such an ideological impact Wiesel urges the reader to confront societal issues with honesty and learn to change for the better.

Although *Night* struggled in its early days of publication and was shunned as a work of literary merit, it meets several of the standards set forth by the AP College Board. Wiesel's novel qualifies as a literary work because it entertains the reader, shows thematic depth, and through its frightening depictions of the reality of the Holocaust has left an ideological impact on society. *Night* is an important novel for AP Literature students to read because it encourages readers to remember the truth, even if the truth is unpleasant.

Works Cited

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