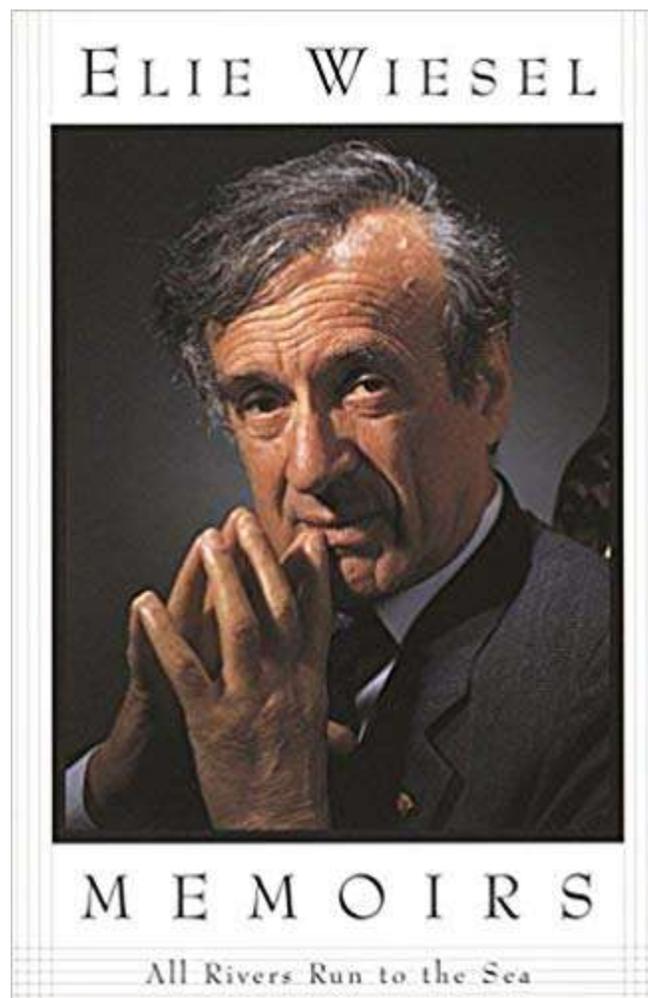


**Portrayal of His Childhood and Adolescence in Select Writings of
Elie Wiesel**

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Abstract

Elie Wiesel was a man with a versatile personality. He was a Romanian-born Jewish American writer, professor, political activist, Nobel Laureate, and above all, a **Holocaust** survivor. Wiesel has always championed the cause of minorities and victims of oppression; apart from his Jewish concerns, he focused on the Bosnian victims, the apartheid victims in South Africa, the Sri Lankan Tamil victims and so on. He has authored 57 books. Most of his books deal with his Jewishness and on his experiences in the concentration camps. No wonder that Wiesel's writings are often autobiographical, his having been a helpless victim and witness to the Holocaust. He has dealt with various phases of his life, starting from childhood. This article analyses Wiesel's works—*Night* and *All Rivers Run to Sea*: writings on his childhood and adolescence with the help of relevant theories. In his *Night*, Wiesel writes about the **death of God** and his own increasing disgust with humanity, reflected in the inversion of the parent-child relationship, as his father declines to a helpless state and Wiesel becomes his resentful teenage caregiver (*Night, Wikipedia*). In *All Rivers Run to Sea*, taking the title of his autobiography from Ecclesiastes, Elie Wiesel presents the important people and events of his life, beginning with his childhood in Sighet, Romania, and culminating in his 1969 marriage in Jerusalem (*All Rivers Run to Sea, Wikipedia*).

Keywords:

Importance of Childhood

Childhood is necessarily the first and the happiest stage in the life of every human being. Out of the twenty-four hours, most of the child's time will be spent sleeping. The child gives meaning to the existence of its parents, but the child need not and cannot find a meaning to its own life at this stage. It is also a stage in which the child gets recognized for everything it does. Every child comes to this world as an angel with no thoughts about the future struggle it is going to encounter in the world. All the basic necessities of the child are taken care of by the parents and this interaction leads to trust or mistrust. The child cries immediately after birth because the outer world is strange, and the people are strangers.

Development of Self-Concept – Eli Wiesel's Childhood

No child is born with a self-concept, but as time goes on, it will develop a questioning spirit which made Wordsworth say, "Child is the father of man". The child depends upon the mother for comfort and sustenance according to Erik Erikson.

Eli Wiesel was born in Sighet, Romania on September 30, 1928. He was the third of four children; the others being Hilda, Bea, and Tzipora. Regarding Wiesel's childhood, he was brought up in a religious home set up, through the influence of his mother and grandfather. His mother introduced him to the Hasidic Masters. His grandfather's influence made him write Hasidic tales. His father encouraged him to learn modern Hebrew literature. His mother encouraged him to learn the sacred Jewish texts. Whether or not a self concept develops in a child, a kind of existential question is aroused in a child, according to Erik Erikson.

Competence: Industry Vs Inferiority

Till Wiesel's attaining the age of eight, his mother herself did not know whether her son would become a great man in Israel. It happened, but she was not there to see that day. Actually, it comes under Erikson's psycho-social stage of Competence: Industry Vs Inferiority, age ranging

between 5-12. It is a stage where the existential question looms: Whether I could make it in the world of people and things? Children at this stage are becoming more aware of themselves as individuals. They work hard at being responsible, being good and doing it right. They are now more reasonable to share and cooperate.

Adolescent Stage

According to Erikson, the next stage is the adolescent stage which lasts from 13-19 years. He points out that the adolescent mind is essentially a mind or moratorium, a psycho-social stage between childhood and adulthood and between the morality learned by the child, and the ethics to be developed by the adult. (Erikson, 1963, p.245) Thus, adolescence is a stage where there occurs a confusion in the role we are to play in this world and the identity crisis arises: Who am I? The adolescent is newly concerned with how one appears to others. The teenager must achieve identity in occupation, gender roles, politics and in some culture and religion. Erikson is credited with coining the term 'identity crisis'. Wiesel has also written another work named "*The Forgotten*" which is the story of Elhanan Rosenbaum and Malkiel his son where the son goes to Romania to discover the father's past. It is a French novel published in 1992. In the case of Wiesel, life was going on well till the age of 14. He was going to the Hasidic synagogue and praying to God and also developing acquaintance with Moshe the Beadle who was a man of all works in the Hasidic synagogue. Physically he was awkward as a clown. Wiesel got to know him toward the end of 1941.

Moshe the Beadle

Moshe the Beadle is the first character introduced in Wiesel's work, *Night* and his values resonate throughout the text, even though he himself disappears after the first few pages. Moshe represents, first and foremost, an earnest commitment to Judaism, especially to Jewish mysticism. As Eliezer's (Wiesel) Cabbala teacher, Moshe talks about the riddles of the universe and God's centrality to the quest for understanding. Moshe's words frame the conflict of Eliezer's struggle for faith, which is the center for the novel *Night*. Moshe conveys two key concepts to Eliezer's struggle: the idea that God is everywhere, even within each individual, and the idea that faith is based on questions, not answers. Eliezer's struggle with faith is, for the most part, a struggle of questions. Eliezer's loss of faith demonstrates his ongoing spiritual commitment. But we also see that at the lowest point of Eliezer's faith, particularly when he sees the pipel (youth) hung in Buna - he is full of answers not questions. At these moments, he has indeed lost the spirit of faith he learnt from Moshe and is truly faithless.

With *Night*, Wiesel, like Moshe, bears witness to tragedy in order to warn others, to prevent anything like the Holocaust from ever happening again. The warning was like "Calm before a Storm". Actually, it was the death knell rung by Moshe the Beadle to the whole of Sighet. But the whole of Sighet thought him to be a madman except Eliezer who cannot ignore Moshe. It was the spring of that accursed year 1944. No doubt could remain of Germany's defeat. It was only a question of months or weeks perhaps. Even Moshe the Beadle was silent. He was weary of speaking. The Fascist party came to power. Then with government's permission, German troops entered the Hungarian territory. From that moment the situation in Sighet turned upside down. Fascists attacked Jewish shops and synagogues. The German soldiers looked like the agents of the Angel of Death, wearing steel helmets which bear the emblem of death's head.

Passover

Then came the week of Passover. Passover is the festival of hope and remembrance. It is a feast of seven days to be happy. But it turned upside down in the case of Sighet. On the seventh day of the Passover the Jewish leaders were arrested. The normal heart beat would be 72 for a person, but at that moment the hearts might have beaten faster than normal. The Jews were kept in house arrest for three days. Everything was running faster than the clock. Then came the yellow star. It is a badge which the Nazis forced the whole of Europe to wear. Two ghettos were set up in Sighet, the larger one covering four streets and then a smaller one. Ghettos are restricted or isolated areas occupied by the minority group. There were short happy interludes in the midst of tension ridden ghetto life in the form of the Pentecost Saturday where people strolled freely and unheeding through the swarming streets. They chatted happily. The children played games. Eliezer sat in the temple, studying a treatise on the Talmud.

Premonition of Evil

In the New Testament, the day that the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples of Jesus is mentioned. It is the spring harvest festival of the Israelites when the Holy Spirit came. Suddenly Eliezer's father was called to an extraordinary meeting of the council. Something must have happened. Even his mother says she feels a premonition of evil. At last he comes with the terrible news of "Deportation". The ghetto was to be completely wiped out. They may have known the word 'Deportation', as the Indians knew 'Tsunami'. There were rumors that they will be deported to the brick factories in Hungary. The atmosphere looks like something is going to happen, but no one knows this occurrence will turn the history of a race's topsy-turvy. The time has come now and all of them are getting ready for a journey. Children cry for water in the streets. All the houses are emptied. The streets look like market place that had suddenly been abandoned. They have lost all valuables. Days roll in a fast pace as if "Time and tide wait for no man". There are murmurs going on, people were saying 'Oh! God Lord of the Universe, take pity on us'. The other strange thing is that of Eliezer's father crying for the first time. It may be because of the reason that they belong to a smaller community, and they refuse to be separated. Finally, the accursed day arrives, and it is Saturday, the day chosen for expulsion. The night before Eliezer's family and the others have the traditional Friday evening meal. The Jewish Council organizes it all themselves. The Jewish Council or Judernat was an administrative agency imposed by Nazi Germany during World War II to control larger Jewish communities in occupied areas.

Like Little Lambs to be Sacrificed at the Altar

The synagogue looks like a huge station, filled with luggage and tears. There was no space even for breathing. The people are going like little lambs to the altar, the horrible concentration camp for the only reason, which is to die. Nazi Germany maintained concentration camps throughout the territories it controlled before and during the Second World War. The first Nazi camps were erected in Germany in 1933. Nazi Germany is the common English name for the period in the German history from 1933 to 1945, when Germany was under the dictatorship of Adolf Hitler through the Nazi party NSDAP. Under Hitler's rule Germany was transformed into a totalitarian state in which the Nazi Party controlled nearly all aspects of life. At each stage Eliezer was the only person who believed that God would put them in a better state, until he saw a little boy taken for hanging at the camp and from that moment he ceased to pray to God.

Torture More than the Ten Tests of God

The Hungarian police made the Jews including Wiesel to get in, jammed eight people in each car. They are left with a few loaves of bread and some buckets of water. They are made like air tight compartments. The people in the compartment began to feel the thirst. From this moment they all realized that they will be facing tortures more than the ten tests of faith which God laid upon Abram. Then they encounter a mad woman Madam Scachter; and after an endless night, somehow or other, they manage to reach Auschwitz. Confidence has run down to the lowest ebb. Every two yards an SS man holds his tommy gun trained on them (Jews). An SS was a Protection Squadron. One of the SS orders the men to go to the left and the women to the right. Then the other important moment was the parting ways of Eliezer's mother and youngest sister Tzipora and after that he and his father never met them. Significantly, the book *Night* was dedicated by Wiesel to the memory of his parents and little sister.

From that time, each moment was like walking on the road where bombs were buried underground which led to the pit and its flames. The book might have been titled as *Night* because of the reason that Wiesel was not able to withstand the first night in the camp. The other reason may be that after going to the camp they were not going to see any light in their lives; only darkness remained. How much did humanity cost was also one of the major questions raised. Kaddish was the prayer for the dead. Kaddish is an ancient Jewish prayer sequence regularly recited in the synagogue service, including thanksgiving, concluding with a prayer for universal peace. The barracks looked like hell. The world learned about the existence of the concentration camps through the testimonies of the Holocaust survivors. There was an SS officer, a tall man of about thirty, with crime inscribed upon his brow and in the pupils of his eyes. Eliezer and others were compared to leprous dogs. It was a beautiful April day in another camp where there is an inscription, "Work is Liberty". The road of torture of the Jewish people, especially that of Wiesel's suffering would not have ended until he expressed his trauma through his 40 books. A number was engraved on Eliezer's left hand and it was A 7713.

Life in Captivity – Intolerable Suffering

Days pass with roll calls, black coffee in the morning, and at noon, a soup. The stay at Auschwitz must have been painful. Sometimes, the thought of the wife and daughter comes to Shlomo as a small summer cloud. Medical examinations taking place during the early hours of the morning show that even doctors who are known for being kind, behave like devils. Then comes the gold tooth episode for which bread and margarine of extra ration are given as bribery and one fine evening the crowned tooth was finally pulled out with a rusty spoon by a dentist from Warsaw. Most of the time terror was stronger than hunger for the prisoners. Air planes threw bombs upon Buna of which Eliezer (Wiesel) was not afraid. Here in this memoir Eliezer is the speaker and also the persona of Wiesel. Rosh Hashanah is the New Year in the Jewish calendar. The last evening of the accursed year the same soup is provided.

The next day Eliezer hears people wishing Happy New Year to one another. But he runs to look for his father who is standing near a wall and his soul-mate for the past eight months. All the affection he missed during his childhood days is showered upon him. He even postpones his thought of committing suicide for the sake of his father. Then comes the merciless selection episode where the Kapos are ordered to kill a certain number of Jews daily. The prisoners do not

even have time to think about what crime they have done except being born as Jews. It is also true to some extent that God may be at times kind to the Jews to avoid permanent kindness in the form of allowing them to rest on Christmas and New Year's Eve and allowing a thicker soup that is a very short happy interlude.

Then again suffering began in the form of swelling in the the right foot. The doctor planned an operation. There the menu was a little better. The patients were given good bread and again the thicker soup. Eliezer felt happy that there will be no roll calls, no more work. The stay in the hospital lasted for two weeks. But there was someone who was saying that Hitler would keep up his promises to the Jewish people. The nights in the camps are too long and it is a recurring image in the memoir. Then a journey towards the next camp. Then Eliezer experienced nerve wracking, hair raising, nail biting moments along with his weak father, as there was selection even in the wagon and the weakest person would be thrown out of the wagon. Eliezer slapped at his father asking him to get up as two men were waiting to throw him out. Now the role reverses and the father becomes the child and child, the father. Shlomo was also suffering from dysentery and his body was shivering and at one point of time he came to the level of not being able to move a bit. His father went down to the level of becoming an invalid and crying for water and getting beatings from the Frenchmen. At last Wiesel went to bed and that was the last time he saw his father alive. On the next day Eliezer got up to see some other invalid sleeping at his father's place. He thought that his father may be resting in peace in the crematory after all those hardships faced by him. But he had a regret, wondering whether his father was not properly buried according to the traditions followed by the Jews.

Darkest Day

January 29, 1945 became the darkest day in Wiesel's life as he says in many of his interviews because it was the day his father died. But life meant nothing after that incident. On April 10th evening by 6 PM, the Americans liberated the Buchenwald camp. At that time, Eliezer became very ill with food poisoning and struggled between life and death in a hospital. God always spins the coin of head and tail which are joy and sorrow, which are brought about by natural happening, but it makes us think that God forgot to spin the coin in the case of Eliezer. Normally, at this adolescent age with the growing moustache, showing signs and seeds of love for a girl will be sown in the heart of a boy, but for Eliezer it is the love for Israel.

Trauma that Will Never Heal

Suffering humanizes man. But here the atmosphere turns vice versa. The suffering here takes the form of a trauma which can never heal, and it only brings out the animal instinct of the victim since the event is of such a magnitude called the holocaust. The victims have to choose between two options and it is four weeks life and death through gas chambers. Here the situation is like seeing death in life as the Ancient Mariner, or there is even a last choice of surviving amongst all these and coming out with nothing left except the traumatic experience of the holocaust. Generally happiness is an occasional episode in the general drama of pain. Even that occasional episode did not take place in his life after his fourteenth year. Even chance plays a major role for Hardy's characters. The characters force themselves into a situation which compels them to commit a crime and undergo the consequence. Here in Auschwitz, Wiesel and others undergo the punishment forced upon them for no crime at all, but for just being born in a race

Hitler considered inferior to the German race and he wanted them wiped out. The year 1944-45 will be an unforgettable year to a race of people known as the Jews. That is because people around the world were born to win but they were born to die. After the holocaust a kind of dilemma comes to the mind of Elie Wiesel, whether to accept God or not. As always God's ways are inscrutable. After humans had been created in this cosmos, and even after a certain stage, it is man who is deciding his destiny and it is not God who is doing that. Whether you praise or blame Him, it is all the same for God.

Elie Wiesel as a Holocaust Survivor

In the case of the lives of the Holocaust-survivors in general and Elie Wiesel in particular, the case is reversed. After all we are all human beings and we put the blame on God for even petty mistakes happening in our lives. It is too much for a boy of Wiesel's age to lose his parents and youngest sister within a course of one or two years. Wiesel renewed probing the role of God in this mechanical world. He questions God through his works like "Trial of God" and others. The fundamental question was about the mercy of God during the course of deportation. The quality of mercy may be compared to that of "The Merchant of Venice" where Portia begs for Shylock's mercy, who himself is a Jew. Wiesel was not able to deny God. Perhaps after July 2, 2016, the day of his death, he might get relevant answers from God. Time only should answer the queries of the Holocaust survivors and heal the wounds caused by the trauma of holocaust. Life meant nothing for Wiesel after his father's death.

All Rivers Run to The Sea

Wiesel's book "All Rivers Run to The Sea" was published in 1994. After such an event like holocaust, what could occupy the subconscious mind of a victim? The person who fully occupied Wiesel's subconscious mind was his father. He appears in Wiesel's dreams with his unshaven face, his clothing changed, and he appeared to be too sad. There are a lot of differences between reality and dream where everything appears to be blurred and dimmed. In Macbeth there is a saying which goes as "There is no art in the world to read a man's mind in his face". Wiesel's position was the same in regard to discovering his father's state of mind as his father was staring at him silently. Sighet was a typical settlement, a sanctuary for Jews. Each moment of his childhood days, Shlomo had taken full care of Wiesel to the level which made him think that his father belonged to him.

Wiesel's father enjoyed considerable renown among the Jews which made him feel proud of his father. Shlomo was more than an ideal father for Wiesel with his intelligence, tolerance and patience. Then came grandma Nissel with her pale thin face showing no favoritism towards the children. She mostly lived in her widow's house a few steps away from Wiesel's home. In fact Wiesel was named after his grandfather who loved God and Torah. He died in World War I which was the result of the assassination of Archduke Francis. Nothing exceptional happened in Wiesel's school days except that he was not too bad a pupil and he was liked by his tutors. A prophecy came in the form of a rabbi's words to his mother at Wiesel's eighth year of life.

After listening to the rabbi's words Wiesel's mother began to cry for which he did not know the reason until the reason came out from the mouth of his cousin Anshel Feig. This memoir travels from present to past and vice versa. His childhood days also revolved around his child-like thoughts including the one where dead ones come out of their graves at midnight and his attitude

of feeling jealous of his poor friends and ascribing great virtue to poverty shows his strange bent of mind. To paraphrase it in the words of Sholem Aleichem a great Yiddish humorist, he would have given anything for a tiny taste of misery. The thing that terrifies Wiesel is the exam and two things upon which Wiesel falls back for relaxation are playing chess and cards. As time rolls on, Wiesel would also be able to realize why his father stared at him in silence. But God is always great in the way he tallies the balance sheet of life. Wiesel could have worried why his father was not able to spare one minute with him in his childhood days. To equalize that Wiesel was made to spend a period of eight months with his father in the concentration camps. On the whole the life and works of Wiesel remain a grim reminder of the Holocaust.

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