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Kate A. Bonacorsi

Houghton High School, kbonacorsi@hpts.us

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AESTHETIC SHAPES OF HOLOCAUST LITERATURE AND PEDAGOGICAL  
APPLICATIONS

By

Kate Bonacorsi

THESIS

Submitted to  
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In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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## ABSTRACT

### AESTHETIC SHAPES OF HOLOCAUST LITERATURE AND PEDAGOGICAL APPLICATIONS

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Kate Bonacorsi

This project specifically examines three narratives that are part of the genre of Holocaust Literature: Elie Wiesel's *Night*, Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, and John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* and the way in which each of these texts contributes to collective Holocaust memory and traumatic literature: as a memoir, graphic novel, and work of fiction, respectively. The paper draws on Anne Whitehead's work on memory, as well as other trauma and memory theorists: Cathy Caruth, Pierre Nora, Maurice Halbwachs, and Marianne Hirsch to offer a close rhetorical and structural analysis of each text analyzed through a traumatic theoretical lens.

This thesis discusses the intersection of pedagogy and theory, highlighting the importance of Holocaust trauma as a topic in the high school classroom. Using criteria borrowed from *The Call of Memory: Learning about the Holocaust through Narrative: An Anthology*, the merits of using each of the three texts in the classroom respectively will be considered. The perspective each of the individual texts brings to collective memory will be analyzed, as well as the uses and limits of each of these particular texts as representations of trauma.

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2018

## DEDICATION

To my family: especially my husband Frank, our son Benjamin Lee, and our baby boy who will be born three short weeks from now...I love you all.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I first need to acknowledge my parents. Growing up in a home where both parents were educators, I learned about the compassion and hard work it takes to be successful in the important profession of teaching. My parents have affected countless students' lives in positive ways, never expecting recognition or thanks. I am so grateful to have come from such loving, supportive parents who were also my biggest role models. Thank you for everything you have taught me and continue to teach me.

I also want to recognize the National Writing Project, specifically the Northern Shores Writing Project. This professional organization allows educators to focus on the importance of writing, and has allowed me to develop connections with amazing educators and other resources. This thesis project was really started, unbeknownst to me, six years ago when I attended a HEN seminar in Farmington Hills, Michigan. The Holocaust Educators Network was instrumental in sparking my passion for social justice education, specifically about the Holocaust; I also want to thank Corey Harbaugh, who in one short week greatly influenced my teaching.

This project could not have been completed without the enthusiasm and support of Dr. Lisa Eckert, who has been a mentor through the NWP, in addition to being a wonderful thesis advisor. I would also like to recognize other NMU Faculty who have inspired and encouraged me throughout my time at NMU, both as an undergraduate and graduate student, and whom I fondly remember when I think about my time at Northern:

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This thesis follows the format as prescribed by the Publication Manual of the Modern Language Association (MLA), Eighth Edition and the Department of English.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	5
Review of Literature .....	10
Chapter 1: But why teach the Holocaust?.....	13
Chapter 2: Characteristics of Traumatic Narratives.....	16
Chapter 3: The Necessity of Narrative.....	20
Chapter 4: Classroom Criteria for Choosing Holocaust Narratives.....	24
Chapter 5: Elie Wiesel’s <i>Night</i> as a first-person account .....	30
Chapter 6: Art Spiegelman’s <i>Maus</i> and the Graphic Novel .....	39
Chapter 7: John Boyne’s <i>The Boy in the Striped Pajamas</i> .....	52
Conclusion .....	60
WORKS CITED .....	63
APPENDIX.....	66

## INTRODUCTION

“The memory of the Holocaust has been transformed into a cipher for other collective traumas. The Holocaust has thus become a powerful lens through which we look at other instances of oppression and genocide.” (Whitehead 150)

After my first year of teaching, I was fortunate enough to be accepted into the Holocaust Educator Network’s Summer Seminar in Farmington Hills, Michigan. There, as a young, inexperienced teacher, I was immersed into the topic of teaching about the Holocaust by compassionate, competent educators of various backgrounds and content areas from around the state. My basic knowledge of the Holocaust and World War II at that point was limited: I had read *The Diary of Anne Frank* and had seen *Schindler’s List*-the prototype for a US student in the 21st century. Throughout the seminar, I learned a great deal about a topic that I found relevant, important, and fascinating, but most of all, I realized how much I had yet to learn about the Holocaust.

Since my initial immersion in the HEN Network, I have taught Elie Wiesel’s touchstone Holocaust memoir *Night*, along with other supplemental materials to high school freshmen. When Wiesel finally penned *Night*, after ten years of silence about his experiences, it was rejected by every major French and American publisher until it was finally first published in English in 1960; publishers believed that the events recounted in the text were too terrible for readers to relive. Today, almost 60 years after the publication of *Night*, there are literally hundreds of Holocaust texts, both fiction and

nonfiction. HEN has largely guided the considerations I make when I choose to select (and thus also choose to *not* select) various materials during the Holocaust unit I teach.

Consideration of the aesthetic shapes of Holocaust texts and how to teach them is a timely concern. Even though Wiesel's "never again" is the phrase associated with the teaching of the Holocaust, since 1945 the world has witnessed numerous genocides: Rwanda, Bosnia, Darfur, and others. The current state of global and national politics has made the study of genocide and promoting tolerance more relevant than ever. Additionally, while *Night* and other texts are often taught in the English classroom, in 2016 the state of Michigan passed legislation in Sec.380.1168 of the Revised School Code requiring the Holocaust be taught in grades 8-12 in social studies curriculum as well. I would argue that including Holocaust literature is an essential component in teaching the Holocaust. For these reasons, a close examination of Holocaust texts and considerations in using Holocaust literature in the secondary classroom is a relevant and important endeavor.

Learning about the Holocaust is a monumental task for students. The Holocaust and the scope of World War II is complex, and the breadth of material available enormous. The traumas represented in Holocaust literature should elicit questions from readers about themselves and the world around them: introducing such texts in a classroom setting may be students' first experience trauma in literature, which is characterized by an "overwhelming or possessive power of the past" (Whitehead 123). Traumatic literature can also include those texts written about traumatic experiences whose authors did not necessarily experience the events firsthand, such as Spiegelman's *Maus*, which will be discussed in this paper.

Trauma narratives are important because they bring the human element to the forefront in the study of the Holocaust. Before the difficult work can begin in the classroom, however, teachers must tackle the daunting task of choosing appropriate materials to facilitate learning. I will review three narratives from distinctly different authorial perspectives, each of which uses its own unique structural and rhetorical strategies: *Night* as a memoir, *Maus* as a postmemory graphic novel, and *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* as a fictional narrative. The specific texts chosen for this project will be explored in their uses and limits within the classroom, their respective representations of trauma, and how they contribute to collective memory. No one text can fully represent the experiences of the Holocaust, however. Teachers should provide students various approaches to learn about the Holocaust by utilizing multiple genres: primary source documents, artwork, photographs, firsthand accounts, graphic novels, and fiction.

Traumatic narratives provide readers with a connection to the victims as human beings. Students cannot identify with the tremendous suffering that victims of the Holocaust have experienced, but they can identify with the range of human emotions that are expressed in traumatic narratives, that are not typically found in a factual or textbook representation of history. *Night* and other texts like it bring humanity to the inhumane. Holocaust literature can provide a “shared space of witnessing and remembering” (Whitehead *Theories of Memory* 162).

This shared space of remembering is what Halbwachs terms *collective memory*: made up of the concerns and ideas most important to the collective group. Even before collective memories could be documented, societies retold these highly valued stories orally, so as to preserve important people, events, and traditions, such as Slave narratives

and Native American oral traditions. Though collective memory is not limited only to written expression, that will be the focus in this paper. Social frameworks that include these rituals and customs of preserving memories contribute to a collective memory that is fluid; collective memory changes as members of the group leave or die, as knowledge is expanded, as ideals shift (Whitehead 128). Though individual memory is important, Halbwachs views individual memory as merely “a viewpoint of the collective memory” (Halbwachs qtd. in Whitehead). Individual memory cannot exist outside the group because there is no longer a framework with which to remember; individual identity is simply absorbed into the larger collective memory (Whitehead 129).

“In Holocaust studies, the centrality of memory was emphasized in the first instance by survivors themselves” (Whitehead *Theories of Memory* 7). While the term ‘holocaust’ literally means “burnt whole,” as in Jewish religious offerings, it can also apply to a mass genocide, but the proper noun “Holocaust” specifically refers to the systematic, state-sponsored murder of 11 million people, including six million Jews by Nazi Germany and its collaborators. The Holocaust has been imprinted on our collective memory, which has always been an important part of social consciousness, specifically cultural, ethnic, and racial consciousnesses. Whitehead discusses at length the implications of collective memory in an increasingly digital and global age where collective memory may in fact apply to a global collective memory. In this respect, the Holocaust is viewed as a watershed historical moment not just for the collective memory of Jewish culture and religion, or for the collective memory of Germans or Europeans, but as an important collective memory that “transcends national [and] ethnic boundaries and reflects a broader shared consciousness” (Whitehead 150).

Marianne Hirsch's concept of *postmemory* refers to second-generation memoirs through which children of trauma survivors experience trauma as well. Postmemory will be discussed specifically with respect to *Maus*, but will also be suggestive in considering the broader, potentially global way in which cultural trauma contributes to global collective memories. John Boyne, author of *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, was not directly impacted by the Holocaust, nor were any of his family members. He did, however, grow up in Ireland, which had experienced its own traumas as a result of hatred and divisiveness. The concept of postmemory suggests that even authors like Boyne have been affected by a more comprehensive definition of postmemory: that which applies to any affected vicariously by the traumas of the Holocaust.

Memory is retrospective in that one of the lessons to be learned from Holocaust literature is to remember the events that occurred, and to avoid the erasure of the voices of Holocaust victims; memory is also future-oriented and provides a warning modern readers. Literature and other art forms are critical not only to the survival of individual memories, but are also critical in the formation of our collective memory and the possibility of working toward a "conception of humanity as a global memory community" (Whitehead).

## Review of Literature

Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* was one of the first texts that introduced me to trauma theory prior to the start of this project. Caruth is important in understanding how traumas are lived and re-lived by people who experience trauma. The concept of the *crisis of life* and *crisis of death* and the "crying wound" are all integral in studying trauma theory; Caruth asks, "Is trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it?" (7)

My understanding of memory theory has been largely formed by the work of Anne Whitehead, specifically in *Memory: the New Critical Idiom*. Broken into four chapters, Whitehead discusses a great deal about the concept and importance of *collective memory*. The text begins by outlining several of the most important theorists in the field of memory studies, thus laying a framework for basic understanding of larger concepts within memory studies.

*Teaching Holocaust Literature and Film* was valuable because it addressed many of the pedagogical concerns related to teaching the Holocaust. This text addressed issues of representation, truthfulness, "problem texts," first-person accounts, and other important concerns that arise when teaching a unit about the Holocaust.

Reading Gray's article "The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas: A blessing or curse for Holocaust education?" was important because it validated much of the criticism I had about *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*. This article was also able to address how much of an impact this text has had through studies that analyzed where students' basic Holocaust knowledge was coming from, and how frequently this text and film were being used in

the classroom. It is specifically due to the popularity of this book that it needs to be addressed, because damage is being done on a massive scale.

The first text I ever read by Marianne Hirsch was “Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile.” The concept of *postmemory* made a lot of sense, and its concept reveals how much past traumas can affect not only the victims, but people closely associated to the victim, even a generation (or more). Hirsch also discusses how art and photography can play an important role in representation of memory. These concepts sparked an interest in how literary aesthetics affect representation of trauma. Hirsch specifically analyzes the work of Christian Boltanski, a photographer who often used anonymous Holocaust photographs in his work; this made me wonder about truth in representation, and whether an image or a piece of literature can be effective even if it is based in fiction.

Kokkola, Lydia. *Representing the Holocaust in Children's Literature*. Lydia Kokkola makes important observations about what expectations should be in place for historical fiction texts written about the Holocaust. This information was especially helpful in analyzing *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, and considering the ways in which its historical inaccuracies are problematic.

*The Call of Memory: Learning about the Holocaust through Narrative : An Anthology* includes 27 short stories about the Holocaust. This text really shaped the direction of my project when I read the criteria the editors of this text used to select the content of their anthology. The introduction of this book also directly addresses questions I had been trying to answer myself: Why Holocaust narrative?

Throughout my thesis work I have read several pieces by Samuel Totten, who seems to be an important voice in the pedagogy of Holocaust studies. I was shocked and

surprised when reading *Teaching Holocaust Literature* to see that he outlined a set of criteria specifically for teachers to use when selecting Holocaust texts in the classroom that mirrors the criteria laid out in *The Call of Memory*. Finding another set of criteria that so closely aligned with the set I had already been working with further validated their use.

## Chapter 1: But why teach the Holocaust?

Foregrounding a study of Holocaust literature must be a solid rationale that includes the reasons to approach and teach the subject of the Holocaust in the first place. Vicariously experiencing the Holocaust through literature “calls into question what it means to live and to die in a world where death was manufactured, and where companies attempted to outbid one another to build more efficient systems to kill masses of people” who were portrayed by bureaucratic systems as subhuman. The Holocaust was unprecedented in many ways, especially that genocide was being carried out in a state-sponsored, systematic way. The perpetrators of the Holocaust were highly educated, cultured people from a country renowned for its artistic, theologic, musical, and literary achievements. That such atrocities could occur in such a “sophisticated” society in the 19th century “calls into question the very meaning of life,” and furthermore what it means to be civilized (Totten, “A note: Why teach,” 176).

As time marches forward, modern societies tend to view themselves as an improvement of what has come before them. “In the past, progress had, for the most part, positive connotations,” but after such a modernized society “perpetrated one of the most heinous crimes in the annals of humanity; and not only that, but used every means possible,” the idea of progress has been called into serious question (Totten, “A note: Why teach,” 176).

As a direct result of the Holocaust, the world saw the creation of the United Nations in 1945. In 1948 the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was created with “milestone document in the history of human rights” and is “generally agreed to be the foundation of international human rights law” (“Universal Declaration of Human

Rights”). The creation of Israel in 1948 was a direct response to the need for a Jewish state, and continues to be a national and global concern.

A study of history alone however is incomplete. Literature is an essential component of teaching about the Holocaust and the complexities in representing such an atrocity. “Literature humanizes, concretizes, and specifies the general and the abstract” (Shawn et al. xx). While students frequently learn about dates, statistics, and facts surrounding historical events, narratives bring specificity to broad events and provide insight as to how real people were affected by historical moments.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) outlines several points in addition to engaging students’ “intellectual curiosity” and “[inspiring] critical thought and personal growth” as rationales for teaching the Holocaust (*USHMM*). To a high school student who is 15 or 16 years old, the events of World War II and the Holocaust may seem not only long ago and far away, but events that are overwhelming in their scope and implications. In addition to examining basic morals and values, teaching the Holocaust “also addresses one of the central mandates of education in the United States, which is to examine what it means to be a responsible citizen” (*USHMM*). The tremendous consequence of these lessons means that teachers’ roles are instrumental: they must be able to help students navigate their learning about trauma and their reading of traumatic literature.

Teaching about the Holocaust requires a realization that there are no simple answers as to how or why this genocide happened. To view the Holocaust as a series of ordered, chronological events would be to imply that what resulted was in some way inevitable. “Teachers of the Holocaust destabilize their own and their students’ interest in

representing this and other historical representations as ‘a factually legitimated, ordered, and chronologically constructed event’” (Fineberg 171). In teaching texts related to the Holocaust, it is important to embrace the feelings of “destabilization,” and to help students realize that this event has far-reaching implications for morality and collective memory.

“The Holocaust is historically over, but the mental, physical, and spiritual devastation that these people suffered is not over. Many do not perceive that even today, the ‘repercussions and consequences [of the Holocaust] are still actively evolving’” (Shawn et al. xv). Especially relevant in the United States is the realization for students that “democratic institutions and values are not automatically sustained, but need to be appreciated, nurtured, and protected.” (*USHMM*). In such a diverse nation such as the US, the Holocaust offers another lens through which to examine the issues of “prejudice, racism, and stereotyping in any society” (*USHMM*). Modern students can affect real change in their own lives by accepting others and appreciating differences, and should be aware of the dangers that arise when intolerance is allowed, accepted, and even encouraged. The Holocaust “provides a context for exploring the dangers of remaining silent, apathetic, and indifferent in the face of others' oppression” (*USHMM*).

## Chapter 2: Characteristics of Traumatic Narratives

Traumatic narratives are an attempt to represent an event that the author themselves may not fully know. While the perspectives represented in Holocaust literature are vast and varied, as traumatic narratives these texts have common characteristics. Hirsch elaborates that the discourse of trauma is a lens through which Holocaust texts should be read “not for what [Holocaust texts] reveal but for how they reveal it, or fail to do so: thus they can be seen as *figures* for memory and forgetting” (Hirsch, “Surviving Images 12).

Teaching the Holocaust should raise questions about representation and memory. Texts can pose questions to students about who can represent the Holocaust, and how it should be represented. While on one hand, readers are told that they can never fully understand the experiences of Holocaust victims, readers are also limited by what the text says, and what it leaves out. The Holocaust violently severed ties to normalcy and thrust the victims into a world in which there was no comparative. Because traumas appear, violently and without warning they disrupt the routine and control humans attempt to impose on their lives; traumatic narratives frequently resist typical narrative qualities and structures. Van Alphen describes the Holocaust as a “narrative vacuum” because the concept of Auschwitz and other atrocities invented by the Nazis had no context (33). Traumatic memory, though it resists organization into language and narrative structure, plays an important role in collective memory. These memories can help the writer to return to and confront their trauma in order to begin the healing process, and allow readers the ability to process traumas in which they did not directly participate. Especially apparent is the disruption in chronology throughout the narratives. This

disrupted or disjointed chronology may include a mixture of past and present language; an oscillation between past, present, and future events; and a self-reflexivity as the attempt is made for the author to understand the trauma.

Individuals play an important role in constructing shared memories (Whitehead *Memory* 130). Whitehead describes the way in which individual memories that are contributed to the collective “[integrate] and [calibrate] the different perspectives of those who remember a certain episode which each of them experienced individually” (Whitehead 130). For example, each of the texts that will be discussed in this paper include experiences at Auschwitz. However, the experiences of the author, and subsequently, the reader of each experience are very different.

In order to preserve these memories, the language of trauma must be explored. Caruth explains how trauma cannot be known or understood at the point of trauma; the way in which the trauma is *not* known is what returns to haunt the survivor. “Trauma...is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 4). Wiesel reflects on his attempts to write *Night* by saying: “I had many things to say, but I did not have the words to say them. Painfully aware of my limitations, I watched helplessly as language became an obstacle” (Wiesel, *Night ix*). Wiesel describes “watching helplessly” as if observing from a third-person perspective; he is a stranger to himself, and there are no words to describe his experiences. Caruth further comments on the difficulty of representing trauma with language: “Knowing and not knowing are entangled in the language of trauma and in the stories associated with it” (Caruth 4).

While language itself is an obstacle, traditional narrative structures and sequences fail as well, because the telling holds “something else that needs to be addressed, something intangible, other than the writing” (Robinet 295). “Traumatic experience resists linguistic representation and in doing so, separates the writer from lived experience” (Robinet 290). From this position is the idea that traumatic narratives in theory can have very little to do with lived experience. However, theorists also point out that “writers often turn intuitively to writing as a way of confronting and surviving trauma suffered in their own lives” (Robinet 291).

Not only do survivors of trauma struggle to find the language to write about their experiences, but the traditional narrative structure and chronology is often inadequate. Langer explains that the duration of Holocaust traumas in particular “[leap] out of chronology, establishing its own momentum, or fixation” (194). Langer explains that the reader is often the one who imposes a sense of chronological order to the text, but that this structure may not exist with any clarity for the writer. “Testimony may *appear* chronological to the auditor or audience, but the narrator who is a mental witness rather than a temporal one is ‘out of time’ as she tells her story” (Langer 194). The mental witness is always re-experiencing their trauma, and therefore the trauma is never truly in the past, or truly out of the present. Langer hauntingly elaborates, “time as chronology does not and cannot heal the wounds of time as duration” (197).

Trauma narratives can also be tools for survival: Caruth discusses at the center of traumatic narratives are “a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*” (Caruth 7). Many victims express feelings of guilt at having survived a traumatic experience like the Holocaust; members of second

generations experience a similar guilt at not having been present to experience the event themselves. Indeed, after years of reflection and study, Elie Wiesel asks this very question of himself in the preface to *Night*: “I don’t know *how* I survived...It was nothing more than chance. However, having survived, I needed to give some meaning to my survival” (Wiesel, *Night* vii-viii). Elie demonstrates Caruth’s *crisis of life* in feelings guilty for having survived, questioning the legitimacy of his life. Wiesel reconciles in part by claiming his testimony as justification for his life. The text “engages, in its own specific way, a central problem of listening, of knowing, and of representing that emerges from the actual experience of the crisis” (Caruth 5).

### Chapter 3: The Necessity of Narrative

While historical context is imperative in teaching about the Holocaust, Holocaust education is incomplete without the inclusion of narrative literature. These memories preserved in narratives are important to our collective memory because they personalize traumatic events: the Holocaust is not about statistics of Nazi victims, it is about real people who were mothers, fathers, children, and friends. Narratives bridge the distance between reader and event, and represent human beings and emotions in a way that history alone cannot. “In the literature of the Holocaust, there is conveyed that which cannot be transmitted by a thousand facts and figures” (Friedlander qtd. in Shawn, et. al *xviii*).

While students may view learning about the facts and figures about the Holocaust as distanced from their own lives, without much relevance or meaning, narratives allow students to make personal connections with characters, both in fiction and nonfiction. Halbwachs characterizes history as a compartmentalized view of the past, with neither context nor relevance to other points in history, or to present events (Rossington, *Theories of Memory* 139). Holocaust literature is important because students are able to “read the past and relate to it from the perspective of his or her own circumstances in the present...the facts of memory must be actively interpreted and renewed personally and collectively by each generation in light of their relevance” (Iorio et al. 126).

The memories that students retain, though individual, are part of a larger collective structure. These memories are dynamic, and constantly in flux as new memories are accumulated and affect the existing memories. Memory is “multiple and yet specific...collective, plural, and yet individual, and...takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects” (Nora 9). As students are introduced to the topic of

the Holocaust and read not just historical facts, but literature as well, the concrete images portrayed in literature help shape their understanding. With each new exposure to Holocaust narrative, students are reshaping their understanding of the events of the past, as well as the people who lived them.

### **Teaching *Night* - Problems with Identification**

During the unit I teach on *Night*, students participate in a “Family as First Culture” activity in which they examine the ways in which they belong to certain culture categories: race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, etc. The first step that is always required is that each category is defined. Students consider the ways in which they identify themselves, and then the ways others might identify them, or the ways in which these culture categories affect them. My students demographics are majority white, and while almost none of them self-identify strongly with their “whiteness,” I discuss with them how the fact that they are white affects them as much as any of the other categories; in fact, that they are white allows them to lack awareness of their white privilege. The result of this activity and discussion is to realize that identity is very complicated, and the Nazi party was able to scapegoat European Jews by labeling them and turning them into a common enemy, the “other.” Especially for students who have never experienced othering themselves, narrative offers a way for students to become more aware of this problem, and allows students to consider what it means for people to be “ill-treated or made to feel like the ‘other’” (Totten, *Teaching Holocaust Literature* 27). In this way, teaching about the Holocaust inevitably leads students to consider how they function as part of a collective group. “It is ‘the unique significance of

literature that enables us to ‘live through’ an experience that is not our own” (Thompson qtd. in Shawn et al. *xix*).

As students begin to grasp the historical context of the Holocaust, narrative literature can personalize and actualize the broader concepts of history, making the historical relevant as it becomes “real.” “The ‘living through’ ...is capable of altering the very grain of our being...Literature is a supremely potent mode of significant experience” (Thompson qtd. in Shawn et al. *xix*). The events of the Holocaust and the actions taken by the Nazis defy rationality, therefore, viewing these events analytically through a historical lens alone is inadequate. The statistics associated with learning about the Holocaust acts in a way as a shield for truly understanding human suffering of the Holocaust. Additionally, because students generally have a limited understanding and conception as to the scope of horrors that people experienced, literature can bring awareness to the atrocities that took place, within reason for the age and maturity level of students (Shawn, et. al *xxi*). ““There is a limited intensity of horrors that our minds can grasp; any further piling up of shocks fails to register--it makes us recoil and leaves us blank. We stop perceiving living creatures...they turn into incomprehensible statistics”” (Hausner qtd. in Shawn et al. *xx-xxi*). While exposing students to undue traumatization can turn them off to the subject matter, narratives appropriately chosen can offer insight that brings truth and exposes human suffering.

Studying Holocaust literature can help students understand the complexities of the Holocaust, this includes the manipulation of language by the Nazis, the roles that people assumed during this time period (e.g. victims, perpetrators, bystanders, rescuers) and the moral dilemmas that presented themselves. Literature reveals the horrific actions of the

Nazis. It reveals the everyday examples of resistance, heroism, faith, and humanity that endured even in the darkest spaces of victimization (Totten, *Teaching Holocaust Literature* 26-27). “High quality literature avoids stereotyping individual and group personalities, beliefs, and actions; and in doing so, ‘complicates’...people and situations so that they are portrayed in a way that is ‘true to life’” (Totten, *Teaching Holocaust Literature* 26-27). In the study of the Holocaust, students might be tempted to paint with a broad brush, for instance assuming that because all Jews were targeted by the Nazis that all Jews had similar experiences during the Holocaust, which is simply not true.

Narratives “complicate” so that stereotypes and assumptions are dispelled.

Narrative allows for student inquiry related to ethics and morality. “To be literate is not to have arrived at some predetermined destination, but to utilize reading, writing and speaking skills so that our understanding of the world is progressively enlarged” (Mackie qtd. in Aubrey and Riley, “Paulo Freire” 130). A literary text allows students to confront ethical and moral dilemmas. Rather than expecting students to merely feel sorry for the victims of the Holocaust, narrative literature acts as a bridge that can help students cross from pity to empathy and where “memory might be used in building compassion toward others (Shawn et. al xxv-xxvi). Building empathy for people who were victims of the Holocaust through literature is possible because “we see ourselves in the stories of others” (Brown 46).

#### Chapter 4: Classroom Criteria for Choosing Holocaust Narratives

In selecting examples of Holocaust literature to use within the secondary classroom, teachers must be intentional. The task of choosing exactly the right materials can be quite daunting. In *The Call of Memory: Learning about the Holocaust through Narrative: An Anthology*, the authors outline the criteria used to select texts for the anthology that closely align with another set of criteria. Samuel Totten, in *Teaching Holocaust Literature* put the second set forth. Classroom teachers can use both as a guide to validate textual choices made for use in the classroom. A combination of these sets of criteria will be analyzed and applied to demonstrate how *Night*, *Maus*, and *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* specifically fit these criteria in each book chapter. The ways in which each of these texts fit the criteria will be briefly overviewed here; the full list of criteria from both sources can be found in the Appendix.

*Night* has become a canonized part of Holocaust literature for a reason. Among many other reasons, *Night* is valuable for its literary merit, its historical accuracy, “true-to-life” characters, and ability to transport readers to the experiences presented in the text. Additionally, *Night* certainly evokes compassion from the reader, as well as motivating students to “examine their own lives and effect change where possible” (Shawn, et. al).

Teachers might be wary of selecting a graphic novel as part of their Holocaust curriculum, but a closer look at how *Maus* addresses important criteria makes it an excellent candidate for the classroom. Even though the illustrations in the graphic novel

format are imaginative, the ways in which these representations provoke analysis and questioning will challenge readers to examine aspects of the Holocaust in important ways. *Maus* presents historically accurate information, and it is certainly readable for students. Artie's self-reflexive style and transparency create a definite "true-to-life" character who is disarmingly honest about the struggles he has in coping with trauma and his relationship with his father. While *Maus* presents many horrific circumstances, the illustrations provide a buffer that prevents undue traumatization. *Maus* presents issues of postmemory that bring to light how trauma continues to affect not only survivors, but those that come after them as well.

*The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* is a text that is widely read and recognized by both students and teachers. While *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* may be engaging and readable, it fails to meet many of the classroom criteria. Problematically, it fails to be historically accurate, and perpetuates misconceptions. Using the Holocaust as a backdrop, this text could be evaluated as romanticizing the Holocaust. The story brings readers imaginatively and vicariously into a perspective of a character who for many reasons could not possibly have existed. The compassion and involvement fostered by this story is misdirected, and certainly, this text does not not prioritize the Jewish experience in any way. For these reasons, as supported by the classroom criteria, it will be argued later that this text should not be considered for classroom use.

Any text in isolation will only be able to shed light on one particular aspect of the Holocaust. Texts that fall within the genre of Holocaust Literature offer diverse perspectives and literary approaches. Teachers have flexibility in choosing from a range

of texts that might be best fit for their specific curriculum and grade level, but must consider the purposes for choosing the text.

### **Vicarious experiences**

A central goal in choosing a classroom text is to “help those who were not there enter both imaginatively and vicariously the experiences of those who were” (Shawn et al. *xxiii*). This perspective taking is an important part of teaching literature, and especially of teaching Holocaust Literature. John Dewey believed that the role of teachers “was to create opportunities for active experience in the form of activities and resources which allowed pupils to construct connections between experiences” (Aubrey and Riley, “John Dewey” 8). The Holocaust victims were in not only extermination camps, but also suffered in ghettos, labor camps, on forced marches, and in myriad other ways. The more students read about these varied experiences from the perspectives of those who were there--whether fiction or nonfiction--the better developed their understanding of the scope and effects of the Holocaust.

### **Developmental appropriateness**

Texts are “developmentally appropriate, [and include] truth without undue traumatization” (Shawn et al. *xxiii*). Certainly, learning about the Holocaust is shocking. However, depending on the age and maturity of a student or group of students, a child too consumed by distressing emotions will not be able to fully understand or comprehend the text, and may withdraw their interest from the subject entirely (Shawn et al. *xxiii*).

Teachers must consider a balance between historically accurate and truthful representations, and overwhelming students with horrific images.

### **Historical context**

Texts should be “rooted in historical context and reflect historical reality” (Shawn et al. xxiv). Teaching Holocaust literature must be accompanied by historical information. Students may be bringing very little prior knowledge to the study of the Holocaust, and will often lack the skills to differentiate fact from fiction, or refute historically inaccurate information.

### **Personalization of statistics**

In choosing an appropriate text, it should “personalize the statistics and foster compassion and involvement” (Shawn et al. xxv). The Holocaust was a catastrophe of modern times. Since then, numerous examples of discrimination, injustice, and genocide have occurred around the world. Students are the biggest investment we can make in the future of a global understanding of humanity. “For Giroux it is important that learners understand the social structure of knowledge and that they are empowered to improve both the economic and social conditions of the world. At the center of his critical pedagogy is the notion that learners should seek actions which promote social justice and break down barriers of inequalities of power” (Aubrey and Riley, “Paulo Freire” 133). There are myriad connections that students will be able to make between the study of the Holocaust and modern political and ethical concerns that students will inherit as they enter adulthood as citizens of a global community.

### **Marginalized experiences at the forefront**

Another important consideration is to choose “stories that feature, rather than marginalize, the Jewish experience during the Holocaust, [with the] predominant focus on Jews *as they lived*, rather than as they died” (Shawn et al. xxvi). Stories of rescuers certainly exist; however, presenting only hopeful stories of people who risked their lives

to help Jewish victims would present an inaccurate representation of history, as the majority of people chose *not* to aid their Jewish neighbors. While there were many other groups targeted by the Nazis, the Jewish people were the only group the Nazis sought to destroy completely.

### **Ability to affect change through literature**

Literature should “motivate students to examine their own lives and behavior and affect change where possible” (Shawn et al. *xxvi*). This concept is one of the basic tenets of Freire’s philosophy on education: “the significance of learners and teachers developing ‘conscientisation’ which empowers both to change the world in the name of social justice” (Aubrey and Riley, “Paulo Freire” 128). The teacher’s selection of literature and guidance while reading the text becomes an integral part of students’ learning and empathy: “learning is based upon mutual respect between the learner and teacher with shared values and the need to act and transform the world” (Aubrey and Riley, “Paulo Freire” 131).

Rosenberg (1988) “posits that understanding the Holocaust should, theoretically, ‘radically change how one experiences and acts in the world’ and that students would come to evaluate their ‘own behavior and that of one’s society’ through the lens of the Holocaust. ‘Those who integrate the Holocaust into consciousness,’ he says, ‘find that their world becomes a different world and that they must generate a new way to be in the new world’” (Shawn et al. *xxvii*). After studying the Holocaust, many students will be made aware of evils modern society is capable of. The study of the Holocaust may drastically change some students’ worldview, especially in considering how entire governments are capable of acting immorally. In part, this disillusionment is an important

part of becoming a responsible citizen willing to challenge and question injustice when it occurs, even when those challenges are uncomfortable or perhaps even illegal.

### **Varied perspectives**

Choices should reflect “varied perspectives of authors” (Shawn et al. *xxvii*). With respect to the Holocaust, this may mean survivors and their children, who are second-generation victims of trauma. Varied perspectives might also include those who were part of the *Kindertransport*, those who went into hiding, those who were refugees, and those who lived in the ghettos, in addition to the more (relatively) well-known experiences of those who experienced the concentration camps. Varied perspectives might also include authors of various nationalities.

### **The ability to re-examine historical constructs**

The texts are those “that compel the world to confront its yesterdays anew” (Shawn et al. *xxviii*). The trauma experienced during the Holocaust continues to affect victims and subsequent generations. Students should be aware of how the past has affected the world they currently live in, and how their understanding of the past can affect the future. Understanding of universal truths through literature requires a framework that allows the literature to work within “specific historical, social and cultural contexts” (Mackie qtd. in Aubrey and Riley, “Paulo Freire” 130). With a better understanding of the world around them, students are more equipped to better understand their own lives.

## Chapter 5: Elie Wiesel's *Night* as a first-person account

### **How *Night* addresses the classroom criteria**

*The New York Times* has described *Night* as “a slim volume of terrifying power” (Samuels). The memoir shows the emotional, physical, and spiritual devastation of the Holocaust. At the beginning of the memoir, Elie is a devoutly religious 15-year-old, and by the end has been reduced to a hollow version of himself. In few pages, Wiesel artfully delivers a thought-provoking text replete with literary devices. The brevity of the text and the starkness with which it is written make it not only readable, but extraordinarily “engaging and thought-provoking” for students (Totten, *Teaching Holocaust Literature* 30).

While *Night* opened the eyes of the world to the horrors of the Holocaust, it remains “developmentally appropriate” and presents “truth without undue traumatization” (Shawn et al. *xxiii*). Much is said without graphic or gratuitous description, in the spaces of the narrative. Students will resonate with the final image of the book that leaves a young boy who has been stripped of his youth, faith, and family utterly disconnected from his own image when he sees himself in a mirror for the first time in almost a year: “From the depths of the mirror, a corpse was contemplating me. The look in his eyes as he gazed at me has never left me” (Wiesel, *Night* 115). This image personalizes the events of the Holocaust, and evokes a sense of compassion after witnessing what Elie experienced.

As a memoir, Wiesel's narrative reflects a historically accurate timeline and presents verifiable accounts of ghettos, deportation and transportation, several concentration and extermination camps, forced march, and finally, liberation. Readers are

forced to re-examine their own lives and “compel the world to confront its yesterdays anew” through Wiesel’s use of rhetorical questions (Shawn, et. al xxviii). Blurred chronology also makes apparent the ways in which the traumas of the Holocaust cannot remain fully in the past, and continue to affect the future.

### ***Night* as a touchstone Holocaust text**

Elie Wiesel is inarguably one of the most recognizable voices in Holocaust literature. Wiesel was born in Sighet, Transylvania (now Romania). His first publication, *Night*, describes the Wiesel’s life just prior to his and his family’s deportation when he was only fifteen years old, to his liberation from Buchenwald a year later. Elie’s mother, father, and younger sister Tzipora were all killed in concentration camps. In the period after World War II, Elie Wiesel vowed to wait ten years before speaking about his experiences. Stripped of everything, Wiesel struggled to find the words to speak about his experiences. Wiesel’s voice has become an essential piece of Holocaust narratives: “The only power we have had is the word, and with it we managed not only to influence history but to stay alive” (Wiesel qtd. in Fine 111).

Wiesel’s narrative choices distance him from the point of trauma while drawing the reader ever closer. For the reader, it is with a sense of urgency that *Night* is read; there is something more important in the pages than the telling of the tale itself. Within the spaces Wiesel leaves between himself and the point of trauma, the reader is able to moralize the events that take place, something the author does not do himself. The reader will conclude that it is critical that these memories be preserved in order to serve as a warning against the atrocities that man is capable of. Wiesel envisions his contribution to collective memory as a necessary act--a “moral obligation”--in order to prevent the

persecutors of the Holocaust from “enjoying one last victory by allowing his crimes to be erased from human memory” (Wiesel, *Night* viii).

Elie Wiesel’s memoir has many implications for cultural memory. For the Jewish culture specifically, written documentation of memory is a critical tool to *survival*. In his Nobel acceptance speech, Wiesel describes the goals of the Nazi ideology: “‘Forget’, they were told, ‘Forget where you came from; forget who you were.’” Wiesel describes the kingdom of night as “a world where the past no longer mattered” (Wiesel “Hope, Despair and Memory”). By attempting to wipe away not only Jews but Jewish memory, the Nazis believed they could exterminate every trace of an entire ethnic group. In part, this forgetting is what led to the atrocities of the Holocaust.

After 1945, the world struggled to return to a state of ‘normalcy.’ Surely, after the events of World War II, it would prove impossible. Though Wiesel made the impossibly difficult choice to write about his traumatic memory, the seeming desire of the world to forget, to move on, kept Wiesel from finding a publisher for *Night*; the manuscript was rejected by every major French and American publisher. Elie Wiesel was forced to cut down his original manuscript; the result is the version of *Night* that presents the events of the memoir starkly, and from a narrative distance. As Fine illuminates, “Wiesel insists that he writes and speaks *around* the Holocaust and not *about* it, the message is communicated through the truth left unsaid” (121). Unquestionably, the atrocities that Wiesel witnessed defy commentary of any kind. *Night* becomes a portal through which the reader is asked to look.

### **Language throughout *Night***

Wiesel demonstrates the power of language as a tool that can either silence or give voice. Amoral language is reflected in the language used by perpetrators and collaborators. Throughout *Night* examples of this forgetting can be seen through the cruel, apathetic treatment of the prisoners by their captors. Language directed at the prisoners by Nazis and their collaborators refers to human beings as ‘dogs’ and ‘swine’. Truly, perpetrators who attended ballets and listened to classical music must have discarded their “ethical, cultural and religious memory” in order to have participated in such acts (Wiesel, “Hope, Despair and Memory”). The absence of language and the absence of memory on the part of the perpetrators is in part what Wiesel attributes to the devolution of humanity during the Holocaust in which “mankind...succeeded in building an inverted Tower of Babel” (Wiesel, “Hope, Despair and Memory”). In contrast, Wiesel’s language, articulate and precise is attached to memory and remembrance.

Wiesel’s prose lacks ornamentation of any kind--the events in *Night* are reported to the reader, they need no interpretation or commentary. Using a sparse writing style and matter-of-fact tone Wiesel creates a stark representation of reality. Where description lacks, the reader is drawn horrifyingly closer to the text. Elie describes his loss of identity in his first night in camp, and with this description conveys a dramatic sense of disorientation: “We were incapable of thinking. Our sense were numbed, everything was fading into a fog. We no longer clung to anything...In one terrifying moment of lucidity, I thought of us...condemned to wander through space until the end of time, seeking redemption, seeking oblivion, without any hope of finding either” (*Night*, 36). The description of everything “fading into a fog” leaves out specific details and emotional responses. The lack of description provides space for the reader to moralize the text.

Wiesel believes it is the “first task of the Jew and of the writer...to make people aware of their conscious” (qtd. in Fine 113). The silences, the moments where details are left out, offer space for the victims who are unable to speak. Terrence Des Pres describes “silence as the presence of the dead, of the camps, of evil so overwhelming and unspeakable that only silence, in its infinitude, can begin to represent it” (qtd. in Fine 122).

Robinett’s analysis of the psychological state of combat soldiers can be applied to other victims of trauma, and is readily apparent in narratives of trauma, including Holocaust narratives. Robinett describes the state that soldiers enter while in combat as one devoid of emotion, where the soldiers are numb to their surroundings, “so that they do not go to pieces before the horror” (Robinett 299). For victims of the Holocaust, this kind of emotional detachment soldiers retreat to on the battlefield was an ongoing, endless “indifference that allows them to survive” (Robinett 299). As in other trauma narratives, “the language and syntax are unvaryingly straightforward” in *Night* (Robinett 300). Elie tragically recounts watching his own father beaten by the SS without feeling any sorrow for him; when his father dies Wiesel feels not grief, but a sense of freedom. “The flatness of the tone and structure and the indifference to the often spectacular horror of the events leaves the reader stunned not only at the incidents themselves, but also at the recognition of the state out of which the narrator is speaking” (Robinett 300).

When Akiba Drumer fails the selection, he asks Elie and the others to say Kaddish for him after he is gone: “We promised: in three days, when we would see the smoke rising from the chimney, we would think of him. We would gather the men and hold a special service. All his friends would say Kaddish...There followed terrible

days...And three days after he left, we forgot to say Kaddish” (Wiesel, *Night* 77). Wiesel does not further elaborate on his response or the response of any of the others--in fact, it is possible that this realization did not occur to him until after his experiences in camp. This passage demonstrates the isolation in which each person existed. There is no commentary here from the author about the tragedy of the forgotten Kaddish. Indeed, the Kaddish was left unsaid not just in the narrative of *Night*, but for millions of others who perished.

### **First-person survivor testimony**

The first person perspective of *Night* serves as both a humanization of the Holocaust and a rebellion of the way in which the Nazi machine strove to eliminate individual identity and existence of European Jews. The choice of writing his account from a first person perspective is powerful. “The task of the storyteller is not to ‘entertain’ us, but to engage us, to draw us in, so that the mad logic of the story from another world becomes a logic credible enough so that we can see that it could be the logic of our world” (Brown 46). The reader is immediately brought into direct involvement with Elie’s experiences of the Holocaust: the first person “I” provides the reader “an opportunity to identify with ‘I,’ in the past, with the author” forming an important connection between narrator and reader (Robinett 307). This identification is so important in the study of the Holocaust in order for those who study this event to see victims as *people* and not as *data*. Firsthand narratives personalize the experiences of the Holocaust within the larger narrative.

Another authorial choice Wiesel uses effectively throughout *Night* is the use of rhetorical questions. The author does not have answers to these questions, nor will the

reader. This choice underscores the senselessness of the Holocaust and the void that remains for survivors and others who cannot find answers to their questions. Among the many examples throughout the text are questions that cannot be fully answered: “What had happened to me?” (39), “For God’s sake, where is God?” (65), “How much longer would our lives be lived from one ‘last night’ to the next?” (83). These questions are cries for help, and they go unanswered. For the reader, the sense of desperation and alienation becomes apparent.

### **Blurred chronology**

*Night* refuses to be bound to clear distinctions of time. “Logical sequences fail” in describing a world of illogic; in one of the most haunting passages of the text, Elie describes his first night in Auschwitz that turned his life into “one long night” (Wiesel, *Night* 34). In recounting the first day in camp, Wiesel states: “So many events had taken place in just a few hours that I had completely lost all notion of time. When had we left our homes? And the ghetto? And the train? Only a week ago? One night? *One single night?*” (*Night*, 37). The concept of time does not matter in Auschwitz. Elie describes how the realization of the fate of so many Jews turned his life into “one long night.” Throughout the text time is marked only by recognition of “firsts” and “lasts.” In Chapter 5, Elie describes the approach of Rosh Hashanah, the last day of the Jewish year: “The last day of the year. The word “last” had an odd ring to it. What if really were the last day?” (Wiesel, *Night* 66).

The uncertainty of time throughout the narrative structure reflects the uncertainty with which victims of the Holocaust were forced to live. “Traumatic experience produces narrative structures that are fractured and erratic” (Robinett). Throughout the text there is

a mixture of descriptions of the past and commentary from the future. In the early part of *Night* Wiesel uses this type of fractured structure of time: “‘The yellow star? So what? It’s not lethal...’ (Poor Father! Of what then did you die?)” (Wiesel, *Night* 11). Wiesel again oscillates between past and present in describing how he was beaten by Idek the Kapo while in camp, and then the chance meeting years later in Paris of the young girl who had comforted him (Wiesel, *Night* 53). Blurring the lines of chronology reflects the way in which survivors are forced to constantly live with and return to their trauma. Traumatic events do not exist as historical events of the past, but rather, they repeatedly haunt the victims.

It is impossible for Wiesel to reconcile with the events of the Holocaust. At the end of the text, he describes seeing his reflection in a mirror for the first time since his deportation: “From the depths of the mirror, a corpse was contemplating me. The look in his eyes as he gazed at me has never left me” (Wiesel 115). There is such a disconnect between the person Elie was before the Holocaust, and in one year’s time, who he has become. Not only is his physical form no longer recognizable to him, but he compares even his gaze to that of a corpse. There is no longer any life in his eyes; he is paradoxically a deceased survivor.

Elie Wiesel has taken up the responsibility to be a voice for humanity through literature. What should be done with memories? Whitehead quotes Nietzsche, who states that memory is indeed a burden. Whitehead elaborates on this idea: “the accumulated weight of the past threatens to crush him entirely” (Whitehead 86). While Nietzsche defends purposeful forgetting to release these traumatic memories, Kundera claims that although forgetting can “lighten the burden of our existence, it can also disburden us in

more troubling ways, leaving us feeling ‘insignificant’ and only ‘half real’ (qtd. in Whitehead 87). Therefore, forgetting is not an option that carries any moral responsibility.

Moshe the Beadle is a foreigner from Sighet who is deported and miraculously survives. When he returns to Sighet to warn the Jews, he says, “I wanted to return to Sighet to describe to you my death...Life? I no longer care to live” (Wiesel, *Night* 7). Moshe the Beadle gives one of several unheeded warnings throughout the text. Elie recognizes the mistake in not listening to the warnings of Moshe, who had experienced the horrors of the Holocaust firsthand. Like Moshe, the reader finds Wiesel a warning to the horrors that humanity is capable of; like Elie, the reader can surmise that a terrible fate awaits those who do not heed the warnings of others. Wiesel hopes that we will listen.

In studying *Night*, students see that “Wiesel’s summons to responsibility demands remembrance as well as action” (Fienberg 174). “Never again” is a phrase closely attached to the Holocaust and its study. Our children “should be blessed to know and make a world where the scenes *Night* renders are confined solely to the past,” (Rosen qtd. in Fienberg 174) though since the Holocaust, our world has witnessed genocide in Darfur, Rwanda, Armenia, and elsewhere. A unit in teaching the Holocaust must end, in the style of Elie Wiesel himself, with questions. The realization students must reach is not a clear answer of how or why, but the realization that they are each a critical piece in preserving collective memories and deciding what will be done with them.

## Chapter 6: Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and the Graphic Novel

### **How *Maus* addresses the classroom criteria**

In an interview, Spiegelman references the 13 years it took him to compile and synthesize all the information required to write the two volumes of *Maus* (Boyne, on the other hand, attests to having written *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* in less than three days) (James 697). Though *Maus* was initially classified by *The New York Times* as “fiction,” it later moved to the nonfiction list. The choice to represent people as animals pictorially presents a component for analysis, but does not negate the factual nature of the story itself; *Maus* provides a work that is “historically accurate,” and in fact challenges, rather than conveys “misconceptions about the history [and] the people involved” (Totten, *Teaching Holocaust Literature* 29-30).

Not only is *Maus* “readable,” the groundbreaking stylistic choice of graphic novel creates a new experience for readers of Holocaust literature that requires not only reading and analysis of the text, but the images as well (Totten, *Teaching Holocaust Literature* 30). In combination, these components foster critical thinking not only about the historical events themselves, or the affects on the characters, but the implications of representation. The artistic choices that Spiegelman employs throughout the text will be as “engaging and thought-provoking to students” as the text will be (Totten, *Teaching Holocaust Literature* 30). Spiegelman is not communicating his father’s Holocaust survival story alone; he is also communicating the process of writing *Maus*, the issues and concerns of representation, and the ways in which identity and identification are complex. These important questions of identity and representation also challenge “students to examine their own lived lives and the world” (Totten, *Teaching Holocaust*

*Literature* 32).

The struggle between Art and his father, as well as the self-reflexive way he discusses his inability to process his own Holocaust trauma, and his parents' experience as well, makes the character of Artie in the text very real and relatable; Art and Vladek are certainly presented as "'true-to-life' characters" (Totten, *Teaching Holocaust Literature* 31). The ways in which Holocaust trauma never leaves the lives of the Spiegelman family dispels stereotypes about the "optimistic survivor" (Totten, *Teaching Holocaust Literature* 31). From the first frame, to the last, where Vladek mistakenly calls Art the name of his brother Richieu who was killed during the Holocaust, it is clear that the effects of the trauma they have experienced will never be absent.

The anthropomorphized characters in *Maus*, because of their lack of specificity, make it easier for the reader to imagine themselves in the position of the characters and help the reader "enter both imaginatively and vicariously the experiences of those who were [there]" (Shawn, et. al *xxiii*).

The ways in which *Maus* "personalize[s] the statistics and foster compassion and involvement" are represented in multiple ways (Shawn, et. al *xxv*). Readers might identify with Vladek, who in his retelling considers how decisions made in the past could have potentially saved the lives of the people around him, particularly his son. At the time, Vladek made the best decisions he could, without any way of knowing what the outcomes might be; still, the feelings of guilt and regret haunt him until the final frame of *Maus*. Art's honesty about his struggles in coping with his own trauma and his parents' makes apparent the ways in which the Holocaust continues to affect the present. The

inclusion of real photos of Art's deceased mother and brother further personalizes the statistics of the Holocaust.

### ***Maus* and postmemory**

Spiegelman won the Pulitzer Prize for his graphic narrative *Maus* in 1992, the first of its genre to receive the award. *Maus* is a text that is about the experiences of the author's father, Vladek during the Holocaust, but is simultaneously a narrative about the relationship between the father and son, the way in which the story is transmitted, and the aesthetic choices Art makes in representing the narrative. Art Spiegelman uses graphic art as an entry point to understanding the experiences of his father, experiences that have ultimately shaped his own life as well. *Maus* embodies Marianne Hirsch's concept of *postmemory*, or second-generation memory.

Postmemory is not formed through firsthand experience, but is created and imagined individually through others: stories of previous generations. Postmemory characterizes those whose stories took a secondary role to those of the previous generation who had been "shaped by traumatic events that can be neither fully understood nor re-created" (Hirsch 659). Thus, Art Spiegelman is forced to confront the Holocaust experiences he inherits from his parents.

One of the defining characteristics of trauma is the delay in which it can be processed and understood. Marianne Hirsch then suggests that it is not surprising that it takes an entire *generation* of time to be able to explore and confront traumas, as is the case with those "who were not there to live it but who received its effects, belatedly, through the narratives, actions and symptoms of the previous generation" (Hirsch, "Surviving Images" 12).

## **Format and function of graphic narrative**

Spiegelman adamantly categorized the work as nonfiction. In a letter he wrote to the *Times* after the editors placed *Maus* on the “fiction” list, Spiegelman sarcastically asserts “I might have lopped several years off the 13 I devoted to my two-volume project if I could only have taken a novelist’s license while searching for a novelistic structure (James 697).

Friedlander suggests that “an aesthetics that remarks its own limitations, its inability to provide eternal answers and stable meaning” is valuable in its questioning of the dilemmas of representation (qtd. in Young 666). The concept of a graphic novel often implies a humorous story or cartoon. Spiegelman explains his preference for the word “commix” which describes the process of “mixing together words and pictures to tell a story” (Spiegelman qtd. in Young 672). “Commix” thus makes important demands on the reader that have the potential to unlock greater understanding: “unlike a more literary historical narrative, the commixture of words and images generates a triangulation of meaning--a kind of three-dimensional narrative--in the movement between words, images, and the reader’s eye” (Young 672). “Comics as a form requires a substantial degree of reader participation for narrative interpretation, even fostering a kind of interpretive intimacy” (Chute 460). Additionally, because Spiegelman brings to the forefront the difficulties of representation, both visual and literary, the reader becomes acutely aware of how the interlocutor of the story can drastically affect the way in which the story is told.

Each individual frame itself is its own fragmented part of the story. The viewer is required to analyze each frame individually, as well as how it fits within the larger

structure of the chapter, and of the text as a whole. “Comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments” (McCloud qtd. in Chute 455). What is included in the frames is as important as what is not included, the blank space. The genre is “highly conscious of the artificiality of its selective borders, which diagram the page into an arrangement of encapsulated moments” specifically chosen by the author (Chute 455).

### **Disillusionment of the “optimistic survivor”**

Individuals who experience postmemory have “a sense of exile from a world they have never seen and never will see, because it was irreparably changed or destroyed” (661). The character of Artie is constantly frustrated throughout *Maus* in trying to extract from his father the details he needs to write about Vladek’s experiences. Vladek confesses to having destroyed Anja’s written accounts of her Holocaust experiences: “These notebooks, and other really nice things of mother...one time I had a very bad day...and all of these things I destroyed” To which Art replies, “God **damn** you! You--you murderer! How the hell could you do such a thing!!” (Spiegelman 160-161). The destruction of his mother’s diaries creates a further isolation from the world he is desperately trying to understand.

Throughout *Maus*, Spiegelman voices his concerns about chronology to Vladek. As Vladek talks about how he had an offer to hide his son Richieu, he jumps ahead to a later part of Richieu’s story, Spiegelman interrupts, “Wait! Please, dad, if you don’t keep your story chronological, I’ll never get it straight...” (Spiegelman, *Maus I* 84). While Spiegelman has to manage the chronology of Vladek’s story, he also has to choose which points of Vladek’s Holocaust story to include, and which points of mediation (the

conversations between father and son in the retelling) to include as well. The frames included from the present help characterize Artie and Vladek's relationship, as well as each of the characters themselves. Vladek's story is constantly interrupted with Artie's questions and demands. The continued attention drawn to the self-reflective nature of the narrative "remind readers that this history is being told and remembered by someone in a particular time and place, that it is the product of human hands and minds" (Young 668).

Postmemory is not just an attempt to mentally connect with the previous generation; children of Holocaust survivors are also living in a state of exile, always "in the diaspora" (Young 662). For children of Holocaust survivors, not only are they exiled from the stories of their parents, but living in a world paralleled by the world that *would have been*. Artie references the impossible competition of his deceased brother Richieu, "The photo never threw tantrums or got in any kind of trouble...it was an ideal kid, and I was a pain in the ass. I couldn't compete" (Spiegelman, *Maus II* 175). At the end of *Maus II*, Vladek's trauma surfaces unconsciously as he tells Art, "I'm *tired* from talking, Richieu, and it's *enough* stories for now..." (Spiegelman 296).

### **Animal representation in *Maus***

Spiegelman's choice of representing humans in animal form throughout the text of *Maus* deserves attention. Marianne Hirsch discusses at length the artist Christian Boltanski, who often used anonymous photographs in his work. Boltanski, in his attempts to "both re-create and to mourn a lost world of parental origin, Boltanski signals more clearly the gap between memory and postmemory" (Hirsch 675). The choice of illustrating people as mice allows Spiegelman distance to imagine a world that he cannot recreate. What the characters lack in human specificity they achieve as a representation of

“a post-Holocaust aesthetic that [contains the second] generation’s absent memory shaped by loss and mourning” (Hirsch 676). While other, more traditional narratives “personalize the memory of the historical event with heightened realism and intimacy, Spiegelman's animal illustrations have an opposite effect: it resists identification with the Holocaust by erasing any particular ethnic characteristics and stereotypes” (Park). Spiegelman cannot see the world that was destroyed and left behind by his parents, nor can he materialize its inhabitants: his murdered brother, for instance. The anonymity that is created in the human representations of *Maus* “connects to the anonymity of the victims and corpses represented in photographs of concentration and extermination camps” (Hirsch, “Family Pictures” 23).

In her article “Family Portraits,” Hirsch discusses Spiegelman’s animal representations as a response to Hitler’s quote used as the epigraph included in the text: “The Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not human” (Spiegelman 10). Spiegelman’s characters are depersonalized in their anthropomorphism: in a subversive response to Hitler’s assertion that Jews are “vermin”, Spiegelman represents Jews in *Maus* as mice (Young). “Spiegelman would like, it would seem, to make it clear throughout his books that his representational choices are just that--choices--and that identities are assumed rather than given” (Hirsch, “Family Portraits” 13). While the Jews were given a collective identity by the Nazis, Spiegelman’s artistic choices force readers to reevaluate categorizations made based on race, ethnicity, or nationality. These choices are explored self-reflexively throughout the text, and while the choice of representing Jews as mice and Nazis as cats reflects the natural predator/prey relationship of these two animals, other choices seem arbitrary: drawing the French as frogs, for instance.

Spiegelman laments about whether to draw his French wife, a converted Jew, as a frog or mouse, further complicating the concept of representing identities.

Furthermore, the extreme lines and use of light and dark give a surreal quality to the panels. Coupled with the animal representations, the result communicates through its unreality “the reality of an unimaginable occurrence” which uses “figures and metaphors that transcend the confining boundaries of fact” (Kohli 7).

### **Addressing time and space**

Disjointed chronology is characteristic of traumatic narratives; *Maus* addresses these chronological ruptures in myriad ways. Spiegelman’s use of graphic narrative is a drastic departure from traditional Holocaust narrative structures; Robinett argues, “prior conceptions of narrative structure and language nearly useless for conveying traumatic experience” (301).

*Maus I* is subtitled “My Father Bleeds History,” while *Maus II* is subtitled “And Here My Troubles Began.” The first title alludes to the pain caused in the retelling of Vladek’s stories; the retelling of Vladek’s experiences are like reopening a deep wound. The second title is ironic; the book starts with Vladek and Anja’s arrival to Auschwitz, however the Spiegelman’s troubles started long before. “In *Maus*, not only are past and present linked, but they constantly intrude and occasionally even collapse into each other” (Young 682). Spiegelman is acutely aware of the oscillation between past and present, and the problems it generates in the retelling of Vladek’s story.

At the start of Chapter Two of *Maus II*, “Auschwitz: Time Flies” Spiegelman makes a play on the word “flies,” and includes in his drawings on the first pages of the chapter flies that are buzzing around his head and hovering over a pile of mouse corpses

on the bottom of the page. In the first five frames of the chapter, Art is shown reflecting on events that seem to be “buzzing” around him, and are presented out of sequence: Vladek’s death, Vladek in Auschwitz, Art’s work on *Maus*, Art anticipating the birth his child, gassing of Jews in Auschwitz, and the publishing success of *Maus*. These moments in time, represented as flies, are all surrounding him because of the constant presence of traumatic memories of the Holocaust--symbolically represented by the pile of mouse corpses. Art’s feelings of melancholy bring him to admit in the fifth frame “Lately I’ve been feeling depressed” (Spiegelman, *Maus II* 201).

In the “Time Flies” chapter, Art is no longer represented as a mouse, but rather a human wearing a mouse mask. Art is conflicted with not only how to represent his father’s experiences, but also balancing the ethics of making money from telling these stories; agreeing to TV and film contracts; and moving forward after the death of his father, “all which generates a certain self-loathing in the artist” (Young 693).

Another rupture in the text is the section “Prisoner on the Hell Planet,” which uses Holocaust imagery to represent the suicide of Artie’s mother. “*Maus* is dominated by the absence of Anja’s voice, the destruction of her diaries, her missing note. Anja is recollected by others, she remains a visual and not a verbal presence” (Hirsch, “Family Pictures” 19). The absence of Anja’s story calls to attention the other absent stories that exist in the margins, unable to be told. “By making the recovery of the story itself a visible part of *Maus*, Spiegelman can also hint darkly at the story not being recovered here, the ways that telling one story always leaves another untold” (Young 684).

In the “Prisoner on the Hell Planet” frames Spiegelman makes an abrupt departure from the graphic and narrative structure of the rest of the text. Suddenly, the illustrations

are no longer mice, but people. This section “[expresses] grief and pain in much more direct, melodramatic, expressionist fashion” (Hirsch, “Family Pictures” 18). In one of the frames, amongst Spiegelman’s other speculations about why his mother killed herself is the phrase “Hitler did it.” Spiegelman himself dons the uniform of a concentration camp prisoner, metaphorically comparing his suffering, guilt, and anguish over Anja’s death to the horrific memories that his parents experienced. The reader sees that the Holocaust memories themselves are a lens through which all other pain is filtered in Artie’s life (Hirsch, “Family Pictures” 18). Not only do the traumatic memories pervade the lives of his parents, but they pervade his life as well. “Art remains imprisoned in his camp uniform and in the black-bordered spaces of his psyche--drawing *Maus*, it is implied, represents for him an attempt both to get deeper into his post-memory and to find a way out” (Hirsch, “Family Pictures” 18).

### **Self-reflexivity**

Throughout *Maus* Artie is constantly evaluating his relationship both with his parents, the Holocaust, and struggling with his own identity. *Maus* provides a “self-reflexivity that disarmingly pervades his text” (Hirsch, “Family Pictures” 12). At the start of *Maus II* Artie laments to his wife, “I mean, I can’t even make any sense out of my relationship with my father...how am I supposed to make any sense out of *Auschwitz?* ...of the *Holocaust?*” The reader is forced to struggle along with the author in working through his trauma and concerns with representation.

At three points in *Maus* Spiegelman chooses to incorporate real photographs in addition to his illustrations: a photograph of Artie’s dead brother Richieu, a camp photograph of his father, and a photograph of Artie and his mother. These ruptures in

visual representation are significant; the photographs represent a “simultaneous presence of death and life” (Hirsch, “Family Pictures” 5). The photographs are “documents both of memory (the survivor’s) and of...postmemory” (Hirsch, “Family Pictures” 8). The photographs further reinforce the interconnectedness of past and present both in the narrative telling and Holocaust traumatic memory. The photos also underline the gap between memory and postmemory: the photographs are concrete representations of people as they were, juxtaposed with the gestures, expressions, and postures of people as Spiegelman *imagines* they were through his drawings. This is not to say Spiegelman’s representations are imaginary, but because of his position as a child of a survivor, he has no choice but to recreate a past that so intimately affects his present.

Marianne Hirsch explains that while “familial inheritance offers the clearest model for it, postmemory need not be *strictly* an identity position” (Hirsch, “Surviving Images” 10). Postmemory also has the ability to exist in the space of our collective memories, and across generations. This space is “linked specifically to cultural or collective trauma” (Hirsch, “Surviving Images” 10). In this way, Hirsch expands the definition for “family” to include any witness to trauma who is separated from the victim by distance or time.

Caruth suggests the trauma is recognizable through discussing and relating the traumas to another (Caruth “*From Trauma and Experience*” 202). The telling of these memories in itself has the capability for authors like Spiegelman to work through trauma. There are certain figures that have been used so frequently in Holocaust representation that they have developed a certain iconic quality in their repetition. The gates of Auschwitz which read “*Arbeit macht frei*” are cited by Hirsch as one of the main images

that has been “incorporated into visual discourse of postmemory...pervasively” (“Surviving Images” 16). The meaning behind the image of the gates to Auschwitz has taken on a metaphoric meaning that “symbolizes the threshold that separates [the human community] from the planet Auschwitz” (Hirsch “Surviving Images” 17). Spiegelman does use the Auschwitz gate as a point of reference in *Maus* upon Vladek’s arrival in the camp, but in his departure from traditional narrative uses his jarring, otherworldly graphic interpretation “unhinges [familiar images] from the effects of traumatic repetition, without entirely disabling the functions of sense memory that they contain” (Hirsch “Surviving Images” 31).

Hirsch cites Nadine Fresco’s work in postmemory and the ways in which the spaces and silences between survivors and their parents are covered up with filtered stories that are continually repeated, and take on a numbing quality. The repetition of words that cover up more painful truths, and the “images that are used to memorialize the Holocaust by the postmemorial generation, in their obsessive repetition, constitute a similar shield of unchanging trauma” (Hirsch “Surviving Images” 28). The paradoxical capability recurring Holocaust images have is that they have the ability to both shield *and* reproduce traumatic effects. The repeated images only have rehabilitative qualities when “redeployed, in new texts and new contexts,” which *Maus* certainly does: “they regain a capacity to enable a postmemorial working through” (Hirsch, “Surviving Images” 29).

Another value of *Maus* as a narrative is that it explores the process of receiving memories. “It makes visible the space between what gets told and what gets heard, what gets heard and what gets seen” (Young 676). Spiegelman gives an “authentic voice” to the problems associated with receiving the memories from his father and processing them

(Young 676). The double-telling of both Vladek's and Art's stories dispels notions of the "optimistic survivor" and brings to light the grittier challenges both men face (Kohli 14). "It highlights the inseparability of his father's story from its effect on Artie and the story's own necessarily contingent coming into being" (Young 676). Spiegelman is able to highlight, in the self-reflexive nature of his graphic storytelling, the "ways that testimony is an event in its own right" and also the ways in which Artie acts as a medium through which the story is able to take shape (Young 676).

"Spiegelman's *Maus* also makes a case for an essentially reciprocal relationship between the truth of what happened and the truth of how it is remembered" (Young 698). As a representation of postmemory *Maus* necessarily explores the circumstances surrounding a Holocaust story; the readers better understand the effects on not only the survivors, but those around them. The intrusions of day-to-day life both in Vladek's story before his Holocaust experiences (his romantic interests before Anja, for example) and Art's frustrations and details about his life in Rego Park illustrate lives that have been and are being lived outside the confines of the gates of Auschwitz.

*Maus* creates an important contemporary context for the Holocaust in that it is not only a story about a survivor of Auschwitz, but that "*Maus* is not what happened in the past, but rather what the son understands of the father's story" (Spiegelman qtd. in Young 670). Postmemorial readers can see the devastation that continues to evade the lives of second-generation Holocaust survivors in the traumas of their parents.

## Chapter 7: John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*

### **How *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* addresses the classroom criteria**

In 2006 John Boyne published *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*. This fictional novel is set during the Nazi reign in 1943. The story follows a 9-year-old boy, Bruno, who is the son of a Nazi commandant. Bruno's narration is filtered through a lens of implausible nativity as he and his family are uprooted from Berlin and taken to 'Out-with' where his father has been stationed. Bruno meets and befriends a boy his age who is a prisoner in the camp named Shmuel. At the end of the book, before Bruno is set to return to Germany, he decides to have "one final adventure" and join Shmuel on his side of the fence. Bruno is ironically gassed along with Shmuel, leaving behind his clothes and shoes by the wire as evidence of his death.

Fictional representations of the Holocaust can certainly be valuable. Criticisms of Holocaust fiction as a historical representation includes the fact that students will "intuitively" be able to recognize the truth in a text, or that students will have had access to accurate historical background knowledge elsewhere, or both. When this is not the case, fiction that delivers neither clear boundaries of fact and fiction, nor accurate historical details can be very problematic. Such is the case with *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* (Kokkola 89).

In considering varied perspectives of authors, a teacher does not have to rule out a fictional piece, even if it is written by an author with no obvious connections to the Holocaust (Boyne has none). However, if an author "is to choose the Holocaust as their subject matter, they must do so carefully, judiciously, thoughtfully and sensitively, appreciating the complexities and difficulties which surround it" (Gray 123). An author

can not simply use the Holocaust as a backdrop for an interesting story without becoming a Holocaust text.

The text should be “developmentally appropriate, [and include] truth without undue traumatization” (Shawn et al. *xxiii*). Boyne distances his nine-year-old narrator from the horrific details of what was happening on the other side of the fence presumably to shield young readers from undue traumatization. However, the ending of the novel in which the protagonist-narrator is himself gassed negates earlier efforts at guarding the truth.

### **Potential Negative Influence of *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas***

Why does such a historically flawed text deserve explicit attention when so many other options are available for the classroom? Because the book and film adaptation are so popular, the potential negative effects of this book are astounding. Studies have found that *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* is frequently cited by students when surveyed about their knowledge of the Holocaust; in a British study of nearly 300 students done in 2013, nearly 76% of students surveyed had either read the book or watched the film *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* (Gray 112). Especially for students with limited prior knowledge of the Holocaust, historical inaccuracies in this novel are very problematic. Though the novel is fiction, and marketed as such, young learners are not savvy enough to differentiate what is true, and what is not. Readers should expect that “historical literature...be both good history and good literature,” which *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* is neither (Kokkola, 47).

This text is neither “rooted in historical context” nor does it “reflect historical reality” (Shawn et al. *xxiv*). The aforementioned study in 2013 suggests that this book has

“had a large influence on existing ideas and [has] helped to establish problematic misconceptions” (Gray, 109). One of the major concern teachers should have when selecting appropriate texts for the classroom is “how the text takes responsibility for presenting the factuality of its content” (Kokkola 53). Literature has the ability to reach students differently than nonfiction texts, and correcting misinformation is substantially harder than getting the facts right the first time. “It is incumbent upon anyone touching the subject [of the Holocaust] in any genre to get the facts right” (Cesarani qtd. in Gray 123).

A text should also “offer great flexibility and opportunity in the classroom” without requiring substantial background knowledge. Here is particularly concerning because without significant background knowledge, one might read this text without a critical perspective, and no knowledge with which to challenge the misconceptions and inaccuracies. “If the teacher highlights the historical inaccuracy and questions the content and morality of the book, then the experience is likely to be beneficial...Where the difficulties really emerge is when the book or the film is uncritically shown in history lessons as a ‘source of knowledge’ and subsequently gives the impression that the teacher is authorizing the content as factually accurate” (Gray 131). Teachers could conceivably pose issues of historical improbability and mixed moral messages to mature students to consider, particularly after having read other literature or nonfiction texts.

The adaptation of this novel into a film has added to the interest, and consequently number of misguided students, who know the story; additionally, the film may add incentive for well-meaning teachers to utilize the book and film in the classroom.

### **Failure to assign responsibility to German characters**

Both the narrator, Bruno, and his family members are portrayed in such a way as to suggest their naivety and innocence with respect to their role as perpetrators in the Holocaust. So how does *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* “help those who were not there enter both imaginatively and vicariously the experiences of those who were”? (Shawn et al. *xxiii*). The reader is able to imagine in part the life of a nine-year-old Nazi commander’s naive son, but next to nothing of what the victims were experiencing while the narration carries on. Bruno’s character is so flawed that vicariously experiencing Bruno’s life at ‘Out-with’ is at the detriment of the reader’s understanding of the Holocaust.

From the outset of the book, the naivety of the nine-year-old narrator Bruno seems impossible. When Bruno’s family arrives at Auschwitz, he can see part of the camp from his room, and asks his sister: “‘Who are all these people?’...Bruno and Gretel could see hundreds of people, but there were so many huts before them, and the camp was spread out so much further than they could possibly see, that it looked as though there must be thousands out there. ‘And all living so close to us,’ said Gretel frowning... ‘Why would Father take a new job here in such a nasty place and with so many neighbors?’” (Boyne 35-37). The reference to prisoners by 12-year-old Gretel as ‘neighbors’ is one of many examples that imply the innocence and naivety of the Germans in general, and even the adolescent daughter of a Nazi commandant. That the “neighbors” were living in unimaginable conditions and were physically suffering would have been apparent. There are so few details about what the ‘neighbors’ are like that the reader can’t possibly gain an accurate picture of conditions at any point.

Upon leaving his father's office, Bruno makes the Nazi salute and says, *Heil Hitler* "which, he presumed, was another way of saying. 'Well, goodbye for now, have a pleasant afternoon'" (Boyne 54). The nine-year-old son of a Nazi commandant living in Berlin would surely know what the salute meant. Bruno's "exposure to constant state antisemitism in his schooling would undoubtedly have shaped his world view and prevented the innocence and naivety which Boyne creates in the character of Bruno" (Gray 122). The implied innocence and naivety of Bruno gives the impression that the Nazis really were, as they defended themselves after the war, just 'cogs in the wheel' of the Nazi machine, with little knowledge of the truth behind their words and actions. "Despite the euphemistic language and the Nazi deception, the fate of Europe's Jews was ignored to a far greater extent than it was unknown. The story of *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* suggests that the opposite was the case" (Gray 122).

Problematically, the German characters in the novel seemingly bear no responsibility for the (largely unmentioned) atrocities that are happening around them. The portrayal of Bruno's mother reinforces misconceptions that many Germans (even the wife of a Nazi commandant) were oblivious to what the Nazis were really doing. In recounting the wartime injuries experienced by a neighbor of the family, Bruno's mother explains to the children, "he suffered a terrible injury during The Great War, an injury to his head, and that's why he behaves as he does now. It's nothing to laugh at. You have no idea what the young men went through back then. Their suffering" (Boyne 68). Presumably Boyne is trying to provide ironic criticism of Nazis who, while sympathizing with some, mercilessly persecuted millions of others. Young adult readers are not sophisticated enough, nor do they have enough prior knowledge, to make this connection.

Bruno's mother may come across as sweet, caring, and far-removed from the atrocities happening literally in her own backyard.

In chapter eight, Bruno's grandmother expresses her disapproval of her son's actions... "That's all you soldiers are interested in anyway...Looking handsome in your fine uniforms. Dressing up and doing the terrible, terrible things you do. It makes me ashamed" (Boyne 92). Mother's half-hearted or foolish attempt to calm the situation by asking whether her husband looks handsome in his uniform. Bruno recalls an earlier conversation where his grandmother said, "*You wear the right outfit and you become the person you're pretending to be.*" (Boyne 205). Certainly, there is a suggestion to the reader to consider how the Nazi uniform 'created' the type of soldier the Nazi ideology wanted. This implication, however, removes responsibility from the soldiers as individual human beings, capable of empathy. It diminishes the responsibility these people have for their actions, as if the uniform itself was controlling their minds. Ultimately, it is important to emphasize that *everyone* involved had the ability to choose to do the right thing, and many did not.

### **Historical inaccuracies and improbabilities**

Boyne tries unsuccessfully to show that Bruno and Shmuel, representative of their respective ethnicities, are more similar than different. Both boys are nine years old, and they discover that they absurdly share the same birthday. The first problem being that it is impossible for a nine-year-old boy to be in Auschwitz: the Nazis gassed all the children upon arrival. It is obscene to suggest that their lives are so similar; their lives and experiences are, in fact, very different. Even the way in which the two boys meet and communicate would have been impossible: "Shmuel would not have had the opportunity

afforded to him to leisurely come each day to the perimeter of the fence, which in the film is void of any guards and appears not to be electrified” (Gray 122).

Another historical improbability is that while Bruno may have been too young for the Hitler Youth, Gretel certainly would have participated in the League of German Girls. As children of a Nazi commandant living in Berlin in 1943, both children surely would have been well aware of the anti Semitic rhetoric and ideals pervading Germany. In fact, by 1943 the Nazi ideals would have been so ingrained into their upbringing and daily lives that it is highly doubtful that Bruno would even notice these as strange; they would not have been a departure enough for him to notice.

As troubling as the historical inaccuracies of the novel is its misleading moral lessons. With whom are readers expected to sympathize? The nine-year-old narrator through whose eyes the entire story is told? Or the Jewish boy who isn't introduced until Chapter 10, who is little more than an outline of a character? “It is the way in which the story ends that is particularly contentious. Throughout both the book and film, the readers' and viewers' sympathies and affections are principally attached to Bruno. His character is developed to a far greater extent...ultimately therefore, the sadness which the reader and viewer feel at the end of the story is principally for Bruno” (Gray 125). The story largely ignores the suffering of the actual victims, and somehow manages to attach readers' sympathies with Bruno, his mother, and even his Nazi Commandant father who seems to have been absolved at the end of the novel when he begins to reconsider his involvement in the Nazi party. “How effectively is [it] going to tackle anti Semitism and opposition to Holocaust education when the protagonists are overwhelmingly German and when the Jewish characters in the film are only ever presented as weak, vulnerable

and helpless?” (Gray 129). Holocaust literature should “feature, rather than marginalize, the Jewish experience during the Holocaust; predominant focus on Jews *as they lived* rather than as they died” (Shawn et al. xxvi). On this point, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* falls remarkably short.

When Bruno dies at the end of the book, “it seems inconceivable that a book which is set in the Holocaust turns the murderers into the victims” (Gray 125). It appears that Boyne has sacrificed historical accuracy for a few cheap, misplaced tears.

## Conclusion

In consideration as to why the Holocaust should be taught at all, Elie Wiesel states succinctly “there is one fundamental reason to study the Holocaust: namely, *to make us more sensitive*” (Wiesel qtd. in Totten and Feinberg *Teaching and Studying the Holocaust xi*). Each day in the United States, the national news headlines center around the increasing tension and polarization among political parties and neighbors, gun violence in schools and public venues where children are gunned down, the dangers of technology, and the global threat of nuclear war. Surely, a study focused on ethical and moral concerns that chiefly strives to “*make us more sensitive*” is worthwhile and necessary (Wiesel qtd. in Totten and Feinberg *Teaching and Studying the Holocaust xi*). The goals of Holocaust curriculum should be not just to educate about the historical events themselves, but the ways in which the study of this topic can encourage “sound ethical reflection, more respect for human life, and greater determination to mend the world” (Totten and Feinberg *Teaching and Studying the Holocaust xi*).

It cannot be understated that historical context and background knowledge is essential to teaching about the Holocaust. It has been argued here that literature is a necessary component, but not substitute, for this kind of historical background knowledge. It has also been acknowledged that “no individual book, not even *Night*, can truly convey the full story of the Holocaust” (Totten *Teaching Holocaust Literature 22*). Each story provides a better understanding of the Holocaust and the concerns surrounding it. As students build their knowledge through literature, they will develop a better and better understanding of the Holocaust, at the same time realizing the impossibility of such a monumental task. “What teachers can do is try to present as balanced a piece of the

picture as possible, conveying the facts, demonstrating the scope and magnitude of the event, and not losing sight of the human aspect” (Totten *Teaching Holocaust Literature* 22).

Trauma and the study of the Holocaust are inextricably linked, and even a basic understanding of the underlying concepts of trauma can shed light on the tenants of Holocaust literature and the problematic nature of representation. While teachers should consider the age and appropriate content for their students and grade level to avoid undue trauma and consequently producing an aversion to the material, teachers can expect texts will “enrich pupils’ emotional response to individuals caught up within the events” (Kokkola 174).

Several valid criteria for choosing Holocaust texts have been presented, and should be considered before selecting one of the literally hundreds of options teachers have available for the classroom. Among the many concerns teachers should make is how genre can do justice to the magnitude and scope of the Holocaust. Elie Wiesel’s *Night* has been presented as a first-person account, to which privilege is typically given due to the proximity of the author to the event. The genre of *Maus* through its pictorial representation and graphic novel structure presents many important concerns for teachers and students to consider, among them the problems of mediation, representation, and the transmission of trauma. Of course Holocaust literature needs to not only be good literature, but good history as well: though any one text cannot be held responsible for teaching a reader everything they must know about the Holocaust, it must be held responsible for factuality in the information it *does* present. (Kokkola 170). Because a text addresses such a traumatic event like the Holocaust does not mean that it should be

immune to scrutiny as a piece of literature: teachers need to confront the “aversion to analyzing heavy material such as Holocaust literature in the way that other texts are evaluated” (Short qtd in Kokkola 169-170). Due to reasons discussed earlier, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, while it does evoke strong emotions on the part of the reader, and includes an adolescent protagonist, it is flawed in critical ways, and thus could be replaced with a more effective choice. Teaching about the Holocaust is important work, and requires teachers to be thoughtful and informed when deciding how to present and use material. I am hopeful that this project will positively influence educators doing the important groundwork in classrooms related to teaching the Holocaust through literature.

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## APPENDIX

The criteria in the Appendix are taken directly from the two sources listed. While the criteria from *The Call of Memory* was used to select stories for the anthology, *Teaching Holocaust Literature* contains criteria that are specifically linked to choosing texts for the classroom. The criteria points themselves correlate in surprisingly close ways, and are addressed more in-depth in the chapters where *Night*, *Maus*, and *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* are analyzed.

From *Teaching Holocaust Literature*

1. The work should be historically accurate, and not convey misconceptions about the history or the people involved.
2. Teachers need to evaluate the readability of the piece.
3. The work must be engaging and thought-provoking to the students.
4. Literary works should be selected that are not so long or so complex that they almost automatically result in there not being adequate time for ample discussion of the work.
5. Literary pieces that romanticize the history of the Holocaust should be avoided.
6. The literary work should present “true-to-life” characters, as opposed to caricatures or stereotypes.
7. In light of the fact that many of the literary works on the Holocaust includes ghastly and horrifying image, scenes, incidents, and events, a teacher must use the soundest judgment possible when selecting and employing such works in class.
8. Literature of the Holocaust should “offer sufficient stimulus for readers to draw

their own conclusions and avoid didactic sermonizing” (Rudman & Rosenberg, 1991, p. 163 qtd. in Totten).

9. The literature should be capable of challenging students to examine their own lived lives and world.
10. Works should be chosen that “enlighten students [and] encourage further study of the Holocaust, thus helping to ensure remembrance” (Shawn, 1994, p. G4 qtd. in Totten).

From *The Call of Memory: Learning About the Holocaust Through Narrative*

1. Stories [should] help those who were not there enter both imaginatively and vicariously the experiences of those who were.
2. [Literature must be] developmentally appropriate, presenting the truth without undue traumatization.
3. [Literature should be] rooted in historical context and reflect historical reality.
4. [Literature should] personalize the statistics and foster compassion and involvement.
5. Prioritize stories that feature, rather than marginalize, the Jewish experience during the Holocaust. The predominant focus on Jews *as they lived* rather than as they died.
6. Motivate students to examine their own lives and behavior and effect change where possible, “to make [the] emotions” evoked by these readings “useful in their present lives” (Baum, 1996, p. 2 qtd. in Totten).

7. [A collection of texts used in the classroom should offer varied perspectives of authors]: authors forever linked to Holocaust literature, such as Elie Wiesel, and by those never linked, such as Kurt Vonnegut.
8. [Literature should] offer great flexibility and opportunity in the classroom.
9. Works by and about survivors who...would, if they could “compel the world to confront its yesterdays anew.”