

# Individual Learning Packet

## Teaching Unit

# Dawn

by Elie Wiesel

written by Stacey MacPherson

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## Background Information

Elie Wiesel was born in 1928, in Sighet, a small village in Romania. In 1944, when he was fifteen years old, Wiesel and his family, along with countless other Jewish families in the area, were deported to Auschwitz, a German concentration camp in Poland. Wiesel remained at Auschwitz until January of 1945, when he was forced to endure a death march to Buchenwald, a camp in Germany. In April of 1945, at the end of the war, Wiesel and the other prisoners at Buchenwald were finally liberated. Although Wiesel and two of his sisters survived the Holocaust, his father, mother, and youngest sister died in the camps.

Upon his release from Buchenwald, Wiesel was sent to an orphanage in France. Several years later, he began studying philosophy and literature at the Sorbonne, in Paris. He eventually became a journalist. In 1956, just over ten years after the end of the war, Wiesel published an account of his horrific experiences during the Holocaust. This work was condensed and translated into English in 1960, and published under the title *Night*.

Wiesel published his second book, *Dawn*, in 1961. Although students will recognize some similarities between Wiesel and Elisha, the protagonist of *Dawn*, Wiesel states that *Dawn* is purely a work of fiction. In his preface to the novel, he explains that he wrote it to “look at [himself] in a new way.” With the character of Elisha, Wiesel was able to explore what may have happened to him if things had been different. For example, if he had been sent to Palestine instead of France after the war, would he have chosen, like Elisha, to join one of the resistance movements there? What if he had been in the concentration camps for a longer period of time? What brutal acts might he have become capable of?

In his preface, Wiesel expands upon these questions to pose even deeper, more universal dilemmas:

How are we ever to disarm evil and abolish death as a means to an end? How are we ever to break the cycle of violence and rage? Can terror coexist with justice? Does murder call for murder, despair for revenge? Can hate engender anything but hate?

Students should note these timeless questions and keep them in mind as they read *Dawn*.

All references come from the Hill and Wang (a division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux) edition of *Dawn*, copyright 2006.

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## Objectives

*By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:*

1. identify the main conflict of the novel: Elisha's moral struggle over his impending role as John Dawson's executioner.
2. discuss Elie Wiesel's reasons for writing *Dawn*, and explain the message that he hoped to convey.
3. explain the historical setting of the novel, and describe the political situation in Palestine after the end of World War II.
4. cite Elisha's reasons for joining the resistance movement, and explain how his decision was shaped by the following: his experiences at Buchenwald; the loss of his friends and family; his idealistic desire to help liberate his people; and the tactics of the Movement, including brainwashing, propaganda, and Gad's expert recruiting skills.
5. discuss the Movement's ideology and tactics, and explain the various ways in which its members justify their use of violence and murder.
6. explain how Elisha's belief in destiny plays a major role in his decision to join the Movement.
7. identify aspects of the Jewish faith, and explain how religion plays a role in Elisha's life and in his moral struggle.
8. cite instances in which Elisha questions his faith in God, and explain the various reasons behind his loss of faith.
9. analyze the secondary characters in the novel, describing their personalities, philosophies, and motivations. Explain how they shape, influence, and interact with Elisha.
10. explain the role of apparitions in the novel, and discuss their impact on Elisha's battle with guilt and anxiety regarding his role as executioner.
11. discuss the many ways in which Elisha has lost his innocence, and identify symbols of his lost innocence.
12. explain why Elisha is obsessed with the following two ideas: John Dawson's hunger, and the question of whether Dawson is capable of making Elisha laugh.

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## Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. In his preface to *Dawn*, Elie Wiesel explains his reasons for writing the novel and the goals he hoped to achieve. What were his reasons for writing *Dawn*? What universal questions did he want to explore? What message did he want to send to people who advocate terrorism?
2. *Dawn* takes place in Palestine, shortly after the end of World War II. Briefly describe the political situation in Palestine during this time period. Who is in control of the country? Who are the resistance fighters, and what do they want?
3. Identify the type of narration used in the novel. From whose point of view is the story told? What does Wiesel achieve by using this form of narration? For example, what effect does it have on the reader? In what ways might the story have been different if Wiesel used a different type of narration?
4. Gad is able to persuade Elisha to abandon his original plans and join the Movement. How does he accomplish this? Describe the tactics Gad employs the night he comes to Elisha's apartment to recruit him. What does he tell Elisha about the Movement's goals and the history of the Jewish people? What vital thing does he ask Elisha to give him?
5. A central aspect of Elisha's religious beliefs is the idea of destiny. How does his belief in destiny shape the way he views Gad and the Movement? When Gad comes to recruit him, who (or what) does Elisha think Gad is? How does this idea play a role in the way Elisha understands and embraces Gad's words?
6. Describe Elisha's reaction upon hearing that he has been ordered to kill John Dawson. According to Elisha, how will this killing be different from the previous deadly terrorist actions he helped to carry out? How does he explain the distinctions?
7. Discuss the symbolic significance of eyes throughout the novel. Cite at least three examples from the text in which Elisha refers to himself as being "all eyes." Why does Elisha view himself this way? What concept does he see himself as personifying, and why?
8. All of the following appear as motifs in *Dawn*. Cite instances of these motifs, and describe how they help to develop and support some of the novel's major concepts:
  - silence
  - hunger
  - a crying child
  - the dead

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## Preface

### Vocabulary

**abolish** – to eliminate  
**albeit** – although  
**bereft** – deprived; lacking  
**blighted** – ruined, destroyed  
**clandestine** – secret, undercover  
**combatant** – a fighter or soldier  
**disarm** – to defuse or neutralize  
**draconian** – harsh; cruel  
**engender** – to cause; bring about  
**ethical** – moral  
**humiliated** – demeaned; embarrassed  
**implicated** – involved; drawn in  
**inevitable** – unavoidable, inescapable  
**kapo** – a concentration camp prisoner who was granted special privileges in exchange for overseeing the other prisoners  
**nullifies** – cancels out; invalidates  
**overburdened** – overloaded  
**relevance** – significance, bearing  
**retaliation** – revenge  
**tribunals** – courts of justice

1. In his preface, Wiesel explains the setting of the story and introduces the reader to the novel's protagonist. What is the setting, and who is the protagonist?

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21. Elisha decides to go down into the cellar before he is required to. What reasons does he give for doing so?

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22. As the chapter closes, Elisha notes, "In an hour everything will be different." He then says of his gun, "I was its destiny and it was mine." Do you think he has finally made up his mind to kill John Dawson? Or is there still a chance that his conscience will prevent him from doing so? What do you predict will happen at dawn? Support your opinions with information from the text.

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23. Throughout the chapter, Wiesel uses both simile and personification to describe night. Cite as many examples as you can find.

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## Chapter 6

### Vocabulary

**aristocratic** – refined, noble  
**conclusive** – final; decisive  
**countenance** – the facial expression  
**deliverance** – release, liberation, freedom  
**embryonic** – in the early stages of development  
**exhorts** – urges; insists  
**fountainhead** – the source, origin  
**incandescent** – glowing; shining  
**incarnate** – personified; given material form  
**inexplicable** – puzzling; mysterious  
**infallible** – incapable of failure; foolproof  
**permeate** – to fill; to saturate  
**propaganda** – information designed to promote a particular idea or cause  
**repose** – rest; peacefulness  
**resolute** – firm; determined  
**vener** – a thin covering; a surface layer

1. How does Elisha describe John Dawson upon first seeing him? What is Dawson's demeanor, and how is Elisha affected by it?

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2. As Elisha stares at Dawson, he thinks to himself, "This hour which separates me from murder will be longer than a lifetime." What literary term does this exemplify, and what does it emphasize about Elisha's state of mind?

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