

Workshop on the Holocaust and Contemporary Genocide
Paper: Holocaust/ Genocide Curriculum

---Exploring the Holocaust as an American History and Literature Framework---

History will no doubt regard the Holocaust as the event defining that larger bloodbath known as the 20th Century. On a scale of calculated barbarism and human suffering, certainly no event in history comes close to the Holocaust in terms of sheer horror and tragedy. As survivors grow older and gradually pass from this earth, the Holocaust may well be in danger of losing its immense personal drama; the Nazis' Final Solution will be subjected to further revisionist scrutiny. Even today, with each survivor still bearing witness to his or her individual genocidal horror, pseudo-historians present pseudo-evidence "proving" that the Holocaust did not in fact occur--- this, despite the fact that the Nazis' obsession with bureaucratic precision marks the Holocaust as the most thoroughly documented crime in history. The Holocaust is gradually being transformed from an event whose scars are still fresh in the collective human psyche to an archetypal myth alive only in grainy black-and-white footage from over a half-century ago. As we enter the third millennium, the obligation of bearing witness to the Holocaust's lessons fails upon the shoulders of educators, becoming a moral burden necessarily borne and handed down to future generations. Teachers and professors must follow their higher calling in observing Santayana's classic maxim about the dangers of ignoring history.

Lest we forget.

At the university level, educators have the good fortune of having an entire course to explore specific events (e.g., the Holocaust). High school teachers, however, rarely enjoy the luxury of time. Teaching about the Holocaust at the high school level becomes problematic. A number of questions emerge as secondary teachers attempt to implement

the Holocaust into survey courses. At what grade level should students be exposed to the Holocaust? In what context should the Holocaust be taught? Is it possible to take a cross-curriculum approach to genocide? What activities and readings should teachers use to supplement and reinforce awareness of the Holocaust? Most important--- within the constraints of public secondary education--- how much time should be devoted to covering the Holocaust? From my own perspective as a current American literature teacher and former teacher of American history, approaching the Holocaust is even more problematic. Should the Holocaust be regarded as a uniquely "European" phenomenon, approached only within the context of a European studies course? Or does the Holocaust also fall within the realm of our American experience? If so, how does the Holocaust uniquely affect the American psyche? Can parallels be drawn between the Jewish Shoah and American events or policies? What American voices, actual or fictional, speak for the Holocaust experience? These are a few of the issues that occur to me (and perhaps others) as the school year looms, casting a rather large shadow over the waning days of summer. The pages that follow are a rather general outline of my approach to the Holocaust through an integrated, team-taught American literature/U.S. history course. It may become evident that my own perception of the Holocaust is of an anomaly far transcending that of a mere "European" event. The philosophical, ethical, and historical issues raised via the Holocaust are too important to be localized to a specific people or region.

Introducing the Holocaust

If the Holocaust was the most prolific crime in human history, it should be viewed as such: a criminal act of catastrophic dimensions. An effective way to introduce the

Holocaust is by requiring students to read Martin Gansburg's essay "38 Who Saw Murder." Gansburg's essay examines the now-classic account of the Kitty Genovese murder in 1966. Genovese was repeatedly stabbed by an assailant on a New York City street over a thirty-minute period, while pedestrians and other witnesses ignored her screams for help. Kitty Genovese died of her wounds, and police discovered that her attacker had no clear motivation for his crime. When later asked why they refused to help Ms Genovese, most witnesses responded "It wasn't my business," "I didn't want to get involved," or words to that effect. The Genovese case is a good forum for provoking the ethical issues raised by intervention versus nonintervention. When does one's moral obligation to a fellow human outweigh the need for self-preservation? After discussing students' emotional response to the Genovese case, I then ask the class "How can this incident also be viewed as a history lesson?" This question opens the Pandora's box of the Holocaust's ethical and philosophical implications. How can entire *nations* not want to "get involved" when confronted with a crime against humanity?

Further Introductory Activities

Several other introductory approaches to the Holocaust can be taken within an American literature/U.S. history framework. Poetry often works well for stimulating class discussion about conflicts that emerge when one's personal values conflict with state demands. Works by American poets can be easily adapted for this purpose. One poem, Edna St. Vincent Millay's "Conscientious Objector," explores this conflict. Although the poem was composed as a response to American involvement in the First World War, the speaker raises the question of individual responsibility when faced with immoral state policies. At what point does moral law supercede patriotism? "Conscientious Objector"

can be readily examined within a Holocaust framework (a copy of the poem and other short works discussed in this paper are included in the Appendix).

E. E. Cummings' poem "Next to of Course God America I" is an ironic look at the type of jingoism often responsible for state-sanctioned slaughter. After reading the poem, students can offer their interpretations of Cummings' examination of patriotic zealotry, Which peculiarly American myths and stereotypes are implied in the poem? How do these compare to myths and stereotypes presented within other ideologies (e.g., Nazism)? What are the dangers of blind obedience or mindless conformity within a political state? In an accompanying creative writing activity, students can compose a character study of the poem's speaker. Also, the class can compare Cummings' poem with an excerpt from the writings of a Nazi party leaders, perhaps even Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. Such an analysis will stimulate discussion about the razor's edge separating patriotism from extremism.

A third activity for introducing the Holocaust is student congress. Student congress is a loosely formal debate in which students support or attack selected examples of legislation. These bills or resolutions are brief, no longer than one page in length; the legislation is bogus, either teacher-written or created by students. Although the bills are generally rooted in fact, they should be slightly outrageous in order to provoke a response. A strong chairperson (usually the teacher) distributes copies of a bill, reads it aloud to the congress, then opens the floor for supporting and opposing speeches. Each student speaker is required to endure a brief period of cross-examination by his or her fellow "senators." The chairperson keeps order by requiring the students to follow fairly informal rules of parliamentary procedure. I've written two bogus bills that are quite provocative and help introduce students to Holocaust issues (again, copies are included in

the Appendix). The first bill, "Proposition 87," is based loosely on a proposed Massachusetts law that would require convicted drunk drivers to attach special license plates to their cars before regaining driving privileges. "Proposition 87" carries this proposal several steps further, issuing color-coded plates or armbands to known drug abusers, carriers of communicative diseases (e.g., AIDS), and those known to practice an "alternative lifestyle," to name a few such groups. As a motivator, tax incentives for those with a "clean" record have been built into the law. As a followup to this exercise, the class can generate a list of social groups within the school and engage in a discussion of stereotypes associated with each group. The Fetal Tissue Bill is another bogus bill based in fact. This piece of legislation proposes using tissue from aborted or miscarried fetuses to help treat Parkinson's or Alzheimer's Disease. The bill also addresses organ transplants by proposing the use of severely brain-damaged or comatose people as living organ banks. Each of these phony bills is based in fact and offers a forum for exploring ethical issues related to the Holocaust. Proposition 87 forces students to consider the possible consequences of labeling society's "undesirable" elements. The Fetal Tissue Bill should provoke debate over the morality of using data from Nazi medical experiments to benefit humanity, as well as a spirited discussion of other (contemporary) medical ethical concerns. Because the bills are composed in legalistic jargon, students will learn to examine such documents closely to decipher their true intent. Young people can enhance their critical thinking skills by singling out flaws and loopholes within each bill. Finally, debating both sides of an issue can force the learner to reexamine his or her personal value system.

Teachers can then go a step further by asking students to read and interpret selected minutes from the Wannsee Conference. By now, the class should have honed their critical skills through debate over the bogus student congress bills. Excerpts from the Wannsee Conference minutes will give students an opportunity to interpret an authentic Nazi document. What is directly stated in the minutes? What isn't stated? What is implied? Which parts are intentionally ambiguous? Which are unintentionally vague? Do similar policies exist in contemporary state or federal legislation? Again, students will learn to search for underlying meanings hidden within the complexities of legalese or jargon. With this comes the realization that the language of genocide is often banal and detached.

Video and the Holocaust

First, a few general words about the use of video as a teaching tool. Showing videos is somewhat paradoxical for the secondary teacher. On one hand, many students are visual learners, and video allows them to visualize people, places, and ideas previously discussed in class. This is becoming increasingly the norm as the technology's Faustian bargain encourages young people to read less and instead devote more time to television, movies, computer games, and the internet. By helping students to attach a visual sense of time and place to abstract ideas, video reinforces learning. On the other hand, videos devour huge chunks of the meager time allotted for each discipline area at the high school level. Also, video overkill may diminish the already short attention span sadly characteristic of many students. Too often, teachers and professors use video as the primary teaching tool without providing clear viewing objectives. For such practitioners,

video is the sole paradigm of education. As with many things, the Greeks were right: moderation is the key.

Availability of Holocaust videos is not a problem. It's reasonably safe to conjecture that the Holocaust may be the subject of more documentary films than any other topic. Therefore, teachers are faced with the pleasant dilemma of narrowing their selection from the vast cornucopia of Holocaust filmology. I've enjoyed success with two relatively brief documentaries, both aired on PBS. The first is entitled "The Master Race" and is an hour-long segment from the superb PBS series *The People's Century*. This program provides students with an excellent overview of the Nazis' rise to power. In keeping with the series' title, the program focuses on major historical events through the words of ordinary men and women. The nostalgic revelations of elderly Germans reminiscing about life under Hitler's regime are shocking, to say the least. Jewish accounts reveal both denial and foreboding as the Nazis escalated their campaign of persecution in the 1930s. As always, such narratives are chilling and heartrending. Because "The Master Race" is fairly brief, teachers can devote a good amount of time to processing the video with students. How can a person regard a fascist regime as the happiest days of her life? Why did so many Jews choose to disregard the ominous signs of impending genocide? Why did so many reasonable, civilized Germans fall under Hitler's spell? Is the sacrifice of civil liberties for economic comfort a fair exchange? What would you (the student) have done in similar circumstances as either a German Gentile or German Jew? "The Master Race" is powerful, affecting, and disturbing. It provides an excellent introduction for young people wondering about the how and why of Nazi Germany.

America's role during the Holocaust is scrutinized in *The American Experience* program "America and the Holocaust." Prior to viewing, teachers might ask students why World War II is often regarded as the "good war." Does such a concept truly exist? If so, why is America generally regarded as the Force of Good during World War II? Are such views valid? "America and the Holocaust" examines American policies regarding Jewish refugees during the late '30s and early years of the war. Through this documentary, students will learn that antisemitism was not an exclusively German mindset. Should America's doors have remained open to the flood of refugees unleashed by European fascism? Does the United States still have an obligation to maintain an open-door policy to the world's refugees? When does morality outweigh pragmatism? "America and the Holocaust" should cause students to realize that responsibility for the Holocaust is not confined to Germany; indifference and apathy can be as deadly as outright persecution. Like "The Master Race," PBS' study of American policies during the Holocaust is sixty minutes long, easily viewed and processed in a two-day lesson. For those reluctant to devote more than a day to video time, Seth Kramer's "Untitled" can be viewed and processed within a single class period. The video is only fifteen minutes long, and students will gain a sense of the mind-numbing numbers of those who were murdered during the Holocaust. Kramer's rice-counting experiment transforms a statistical abstraction into chilling reality.

American Literature and the Holocaust

Finding American literature that effectively depicts the Holocaust is a tricky venture. Like war, the genocidal experience is best shown through the writing of those who have experienced the event. Few outsiders are able to render such traumatic events

with an air of legitimacy. Those who attempt to do so often come across as vicarious poseurs. Still, ethical issues associated with the Holocaust can be explored through selected American poems, as discussed earlier. Furthermore, some powerful and imaginative fictional works on the Holocaust or related issues can be found in America's literature.

Cynthia Ozick is an American writer whose work often focuses on the Jewish experience. Her short story "The Shawl" is an imaginative attempt at recreating life in a death camp. "The Shawl" is a glimpse into the conflict between two prisoners, Stella and Rosa, as they are reduced to an animal level of existence in the camp. Caught in the middle of this conflict is Rosa's infant daughter Magda. The shawl in which Rosa conceals her infant takes on special significance during the course of Ozick's story. After reading "The Shawl," students can respond to a number of questions. Are morality and survival needs compatible? Is life precious under any circumstance? What is the symbolic function of the shawl in the story? Although Ozick did not personally experience the Shoah, her story carries (at least to this similarly inexperienced reader) an air of authenticity. It is a grim but thought-provoking work, one that should stimulate a lively dialogue in the classroom.

Another imaginative glimpse by an American writer into the death camps is William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*. Like Cynthia Ozick, Styron did not experience the camps. His novel is very loosely based on Styron's brief acquaintance with a beautiful young Polish survivor in a Brooklyn boarding house after the war. From that fleeting encounter, Styron creates a fictional pre-war, wartime, and postwar life for Sophie, his haunted protagonist. Although Sophie is not Jewish, she is eventually imprisoned at

Auschwitz. Styron's harrowing account of that experience, as well as his depiction of the madness suffered by Sophie's postwar Jewish lover makes for compelling reading. At the heart of the novel lies the horrible choice Sophie is forced to make while imprisoned at Auschwitz. *Sophie's Choice* functions admirably on several levels. First, it is the story of a young woman's complete degradation in the death camps and the consequences of that experience. Second, the novel serves as a Bildungsroman, depicting the narrator's loss of innocence when he learns about the many forms in which darkness can stalk this world. Also, *Sophie's Choice* is somewhat of a mystery story as the secrets of Sophie's past are gradually unraveled throughout the novel's course. Finally, Styron's book deals with the symbiosis of love and obsession through Styron's depiction of the relationship between Sophie and Nathan, her brilliant but manipulative lover. Like *The Scarlet Letter*, another American classic, *Sophie's Choice* can stimulate classroom discussion about the consequences of repressed guilt and the hidden depths of the human heart. As a work about the Holocaust, the novel takes a provocative and often disturbing look at postwar life for survivors of the death camps. Through his character of Nathan, Styron also takes aim at some American human rights abuses, reminding the reader that hatred and intolerance have soiled everyone's hands to some extent. The length of *Sophie's Choice* (over 600 pages in paperback; 550-plus pages in the hardcover edition) makes the novel somewhat unwieldy for use in most American literature courses. However, teachers can either assign segments of the book for reading and discussion, or the novel can be offered as an enrichment activity for those who desire more challenging reading. Although overly sentimental at times, *Sophie's Choice* is nonetheless a searing study of the Nazis' moral bankruptcy and its consequences.

Art Spiegelman's *Maus* may provide the most original and creative glimpse of the Holocaust experience. For those unfamiliar with the work, a little background will be helpful. Spiegelman is a New York-based graphic artist whose parents survived Auschwitz. In the 1970s, Spiegelman's avant garde magazine *Raw* featured segments of his father's Auschwitz experience; eventually, these segments were compiled into the book *Maus*. Much of the book's uniqueness lies in its unusual format: the story is told in comic book form. Stranger still, Spiegelman chooses outright animal imagery to depict his characters. Jews are mice, Poles are pigs, Germans are cats. The plot structure is simple. Spiegelman, himself a character in the story, interviews his father Vladek about his Holocaust experience. A strong element of tension exists between father and son for two reasons. First, Spiegelman's mother committed suicide while Art was a young man. Second, Vladek has destroyed his wife's records of her camp experience. This conflict between Art and Vladek adds a strong element of tension, woven throughout the book between Vladek's own story of persecution and survival.

High school students generally respond favorably to *Maus*. Some claim to find the cartoon/ animal format distracting at first, but most admit that this ceases to be a problem as the reader is swept into the story. Visual learners find *Maus* easier to absorb than traditional literature. Discussion of *Maus* can revolve around several questions, Does Spiegelman's cartoon format and animal imagery diminish or enhance his story? Why might some readers find it difficult to sympathize with Vladek? What is the source of the conflict between Art and his father? What function is served by Spiegelman's insert "Prisoner on the Hell Planet"? How does *Maus* show that the Holocaust continues even after 1945? What difficulties or circumstances are faced by children of Holocaust

survivors? How is Vladek also guilty of committing his own personal Holocaust? These and other issues should generate vigorous discussion as students offer their own interpretations of character motivation and the book's effectiveness as a Holocaust memoir. Maus has its critics (a Holocaust survivor who annually speaks in our school feels that the book's cartoon format trivializes the Shoah). One problem is that Spiegelman's story has been separated into two volumes: Maus, which concludes with Vladek and his wife entering the gates of Auschwitz; and Maus II, the story of Vladek's Auschwitz experience and his postwar life. Budget-strapped schools may find it unfeasible to purchase both volumes. In this case, teachers can suggest Maus II as enrichment reading. Despite its critics, Maus strikes a deep chord with many young people in its very personal and human story of genocide and its consequences for succeeding generations. While not technically fiction, Maus has the sweep and complexity of good literature.

Relevant Non-Holocaust Readings

Because the Holocaust raises philosophical and ethical implications far transcending the actual event, some teachers may find it useful to incorporate several non-Holocaust works into their curriculum. As shown earlier, poetry can be readily connected to Holocaust issues. This is also true for fiction or other prose that may not specifically deal with the Shoah. Certainly the Holocaust is singular in the sheer scale, execution, and extent of suffering inflicted by its Nazi perpetrators. However, it's vital for educators to emphasize that intolerance, hatred, and human rights abuses are *not* the exclusive domain of the Holocaust's tragic victims. Many Holocaust survivors and scholars, including Elie Wiesel, warn about the dangers of viewing the Shoah as an isolated "freak" of history. An

important duty for educators is to help students become aware that the attitudes leading to the Holocaust have existed throughout history and still exist in the world today. Literary works dealing with atrocities *other* than the Holocaust can help instill this awareness.

Many of history's horrors originated as an ill-conceived plan to create a utopia. The Salem Witch Trials, the French Reign of Terror, Stalinist Russia, even the Reverend Jim Jones' messianic Guayana experiment--- each of these began in an attempt to create a perfect society. Similar intentions gave birth to Hitler's Nazi Germany, although his perverse ideology should have been evident from the start. At some point, each of the examples just mentioned degenerated from utopia's green vistas into the shadowy realm of the dystopia (it will be helpful to familiarize students with both terms). A dystopia occurs when political leaders or citizens of the state become morally bankrupt. American writer Ursula K. LeGuin addresses the moral dangers of utilitarianism as a means to a utopian end in her short story "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas." LeGuin's setting is ambiguous; she includes virtually no clues as to time and place. On the surface, Omelas seems to be very much the perfect society. There is no hunger, the people are free to pursue any artistic or academic endeavor, physical labor is unnecessary, disease has been vanquished, mental illness is nonexistent, and free love is abundant. If they wish, the people of Omelas can even enjoy the effects of a hallucinogenic drug that is completely nonaddictive and has no side effects. However, in order to maintain this utopia, *one* person in Omelas must suffer. A small child is locked in a windowless closet, sitting in his own feces, and fed scraps. The child was placed in this prison at an age that enables him to still have a dim memory of his mother. As a rite of passage, the children of Omelas are shown this child as they are about to enter adolescence; this ritual is to

remind young people of the sacrifice made for their happiness. LeGuin's utopia (perhaps dystopia is more apt) leaves a profound emotional impact on any sensitive reader.

Although the story is purely imaginative, its philosophical implications are staggering.

Teachers can facilitate discussion of LeGuin's story through a number of questions. Why is LeGuin deliberately ambiguous with the story's setting? What might be the drawbacks of living in a so-called "perfect" society? Would students be willing to live in a society such as Omelas? Is the suffering of one person a fair exchange for the happiness of an entire society? In what ways have the people of Omelas become morally bankrupt? What would students be willing to sacrifice in exchange for perfect happiness? After discussing LeGuin's story, teachers can then connect its theme to Nazi Germany. What was Hitler's utopian promise? To what extent did he achieve his utopian goals? How and why did the Nazi experiment deteriorate into a dystopia? What did the German people sacrifice in exchange for their utopian dream? How did Germany become morally bankrupt under Hitler? Which Germans became "the ones who walked away from Omelas"? The story can be examined in a national context as well. Which groups, past and present, represent the "hidden child" sacrificed in exchange for American affluence and materialism? What are the hidden dangers of a political system in which the majority rules? "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" will evoke a deep emotional response in all but the most jaded student. LeGuin's fable is a superb allegory through which educators can show the potential consequences that may result when utopian ideology is put into practice.

Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* is one of the most frequently-censored books in America.. Much of the novel's notoriety lies in Vonnegut's no-holds-barred

treatment of traditional American institutions: religion, government, capitalism, and World War II as the "good war." Vonnegut forces his readers to confront some ugly truths about our American values and their misplaced priorities. Briefly, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is the story of Billy Pilgrim, an American prisoner-of-war in the German city of Dresden during the Second World War. The novel's convoluted plot structure launches Billy back and forth between his World War II experiences and his 1960s postwar life as a successful optometrist in a small New York city. The planet Tralfamadore provides a third setting. Billy believes that he has been held captive for a time in a Tralfamadorian zoo; the Tralfamadorians, Billy believes taught him how to become "unstuck in time." Vonnegut himself was a P.O.W. in Dresden and survived the horrible Allied firebombing of the city on February 13-14, 1945. The Dresden firebombing incinerated upwards of 135,000 people--mostly women, children, and elderly Germans--- in a city that had no strategic value whatsoever. Furthermore, the bombing occurred late in the war when an Allied victory was a moot point.

Beneath its nontraditional, absurd surface, *Slaughterhouse-Five* poses some very serious questions. As Vonnegut himself asks in the book's opening chapter, "What can you say about a massacre?" How does one's perception of the world change after experiencing an event such as the Dresden firebombing or the Holocaust? What justification can the Allies offer for the Dresden firebombing, and is their rationale valid? Should an atrocity (i.e., the Holocaust) be repaid with an atrocity? Do the German people have the moral right to condemn the Dresden bombing? Is the suffering inflicted via a massacre commensurate with that experienced during a genocide? To what extent can social success and material gain heal deep wounds in the soul? What moral boundaries, if

any, should be observed when waging total war against an immoral enemy? How might Vonnegut or a Holocaust survivor respond to Nietzsche's statement "Only through art is life justified"? Finally, does post-1945 history suggest that the world will not repeat the horrors of Nazi Germany and World War II? Students should have a solid background in the rise of fascism and the Final Solution before attempting to connect *Slaughterhouse Five* to Holocaust issues. However, Vonnegut's book, as well as knowledge of U.S. refugee policy in the late '30s and early '40s, may cause some students to reconsider the myth of America as a totally virtuous force fighting the "good war." As a followup to Vonnegut's book, teachers may want to assign John Hersey's *Hiroshima*. Discussing the Hiroshima event may lead an assessment of America's decision to use the atomic bomb to end the war. Should the United States be held morally accountable for its use of a weapon planned in part to intimidate the Soviets and thus launch a half-century of Cold War? Who are the victims in a foreign policy designed with the potential for creating a global holocaust? How did Nazi persecution of the Jews and other groups help give America an early edge in the nuclear arms race? A study of the Hiroshima bombing is a classic example of historical cause-and-effect, showing how the ramifications of the Nazi ascendancy stirred tremors in world events until nearly the end of the century.

Two other literary works will help teachers to show that intolerance and a siege mentality led to American human rights abuses during the war years. James and Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston's classic *Farewell to Manzanar* is a moving account of the removal of Japanese-Americans to internment camps during the war years. David Guterson's more recent novel *Snow Falling on Cedars* also explores the same subject, although Guterson's book fluctuates into the realm of murder mystery and courtroom melodrama. These

books, or excerpts from them, can lead to some lively classroom discussion. How did America's treatment of Japanese-Americans resemble Nazi policies towards Jews and other groups? How did their methods differ? Why did the United States adopt a double standard with regard to Japanese-Americans and German-Americans? Which earlier episodes or policies in American history provided a model for the relocation of Nisei-Americans (this is a good point at which to review United States Native-American policies)? Which groups, if any, face similar intolerance and "special treatment" today? At what point do national security interests take priority over individual civil liberties? In the interest of fairness, should American education give equal time to the Holocaust and the Nisei internment camps? As with *Slaughterhouse-Five*, a study of the Nisei-American experience during World War II will help to reinforce the knowledge that American policy has claimed many innocent victims throughout our nation's history. The potential for a Holocaust also exists in the "land of the free." By learning to challenge questionable government policies, students may realize that spirited dissent within a democratic society is a valid means of preventing the state from repeating the atrocities of Nazi Germany.

A Few Words About Censorship

War, persecution, torture, and genocide are grim subjects. In order to accurately portray such events, writers must necessarily use graphic language, violence, and even sexual themes into their fictional or actual accounts. While universities, at least in theory, enjoy complete academic freedom, censorship often rears its ugly head at the high school level. Some students, either on religious grounds or who are simply overly-sensitive, may object to some of the literary selections discussed previously. Sadly, some adherents

to the Religious Right object to the teaching of the Holocaust as a whole. For this reason, *The Diary of Anne Frank* is often included on the list of America's most frequently-censored books (sharing company with Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*). Religious conservatives ironically argue that teaching the Holocaust violates the First Amendment by sanctioning religious ideas (i.e., Judaism) in public schools, although these same groups actively lobby for a school prayer amendment to our constitution. High school teachers can save themselves considerable grief by taking a few measures prior to assigning sensitive literary materials. I have been in the very uncomfortable position of having to defend literature against hostile parents and have learned that an ounce or two of prevention can forestall tons of conflict down the road. In my own classroom, I make it a practice to warn students in advance if a reading selection contains violence, graphic language, or sexual content. I inform my class if a particular book has a history of censorship (advising students "This is one of the most-censored books in America" carries the Forbidden Fruit Effect: most students want to read a book that has been censored). Any student who fears he or she may have a problem with sensitive material is given the option of a "kinder, gentler" reading assignment. Few have taken me up on this offer, most choosing rather to read a book whose pages are "charred by hell's flames." On occasion, though, a handful of my students have accepted the blander alternate reading. While teachers might bristle at the intrusion of politically correct attitudes into the classroom, warning students of potentially objectionable material is the sensible thing to do. Very early in the semester, I devote an entire lesson to a discussion of censorship. This gives students an opportunity to air their own views on the boundaries

of free speech and the role of art. Generally, I encounter few problems after this discussion.

Perhaps the most effective means of addressing the censorship issue is to show students film footage of a Nazi book-burning rally. Nobody wants to be associated with a regime identified with pure evil. Several years ago, one of my colleagues was challenged by parents who objected to his use of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch*. The parents, members of the Religious Right, took their case to our school board, demanding the book's removal from the school's curriculum. My colleague asked me to speak on his behalf at the school board hearing. In my comments, I reminded board members and the parents that "objectionable" books were routinely burned in Nazi Germany. I concluded my remarks by suggesting, "If we remove this book from our school, why not build a bonfire right now?" Case closed. The parents vehemently denied any association with the Nazis, although they would not retract their demand to have the book suppressed. Unanimously, the school board voted to retain *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch* as part of the freshman curriculum. Since then, the parents in question have chosen to home-school their child. This episode illustrates how invoking an example of Nazi depravity can ironically provide a valuable lesson decades after Hitler's murderous regime.

The Holocaust and Philosophy

Nazi Germany and the Holocaust can be studied within the framework of two related philosophies. Prior to beginning a unit on the rise of fascism, it may be useful to provide the class with an overview of Friedrich Nietzsche's ideas. I've managed to condense the highlights of Nietzsche's philosophy into a single page, which I provide to

the class in lecture form. At the conclusion of my overview, I ask students for their own assessment of Nietzsche's ideas. Why might some people be attracted to Nietzsche's beliefs? What are the dangers inherent in his philosophy? How have elements of Nietzschean thought appeared in American and world history? After discussing these questions with the class, teachers can use the infamous Leopold and Loeb case to show the potential for abuse in Nietzsche's scheme. From there, the leap to Nazi ideology should be fairly obvious. Students can point out ways in which the Nazis attempted to put Nietzsche's ideas into practice.

An overview of Existentialism can also be incorporated into a study of the Holocaust and World War II. Teachers should advise students that Existentialism's roots lie in the 19th century via Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and others. However, the philosophy's concepts did not gain wide acceptance until the postwar years. After explaining Existentialist concepts, a teacher might ask the class why this philosophy gained credibility after the war. Why did life after the war for Holocaust survivors and other victims become a search for meaning? Does Existentialism offer a measure of hope for those who experience genocide or war? How did World War II reinforce the Existentialist notion of the world as an absurd place devoid of meaning? Deep thoughts, perhaps, for some high school students, but when viewed within the context of history, Existentialism's appeal suddenly makes sense. Literature can be examined within an Existentialist paradigm as well. Vladek, in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, possesses traits of the Existentialist anti-hero. Spiegelman himself, as a character in his book, is engaged in a search for meaning. Ursula K. LeGuin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" ultimately implies the alienation experienced by those who are unable to live in a society

that has sold its soul for a life of security and hedonism. Nathan and Sophie, in *Sophie's Choice*, are both doomed because they are unable to find any meaning within the void left by the Second World War. In "The Shawl," Cynthia Ozick examines the alienation and despair resulting from day-to-day existence in the death camps. Billy Pilgrim, in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse -Five*, is an absurd anti-hero trying find a sense of meaning in a meaningless atrocity, the Dresden firebombing. As with any philosophical concept, students should be encouraged to evaluate Existentialism's validity as a belief system. Again, by viewing this philosophy in the context of history and literature, young people will understand why certain beliefs gain acceptance at key moments in history.

Other Holocaust-related Activities

Finally, educators can take a number of other approaches to studying the Holocaust at the high school level. One proactive method is to conduct a mock trial. The teacher can act as facilitator as the class assumes complete responsibility for the activity. Responsible, mature students should be appointed as judge, prosecutor, and defense attorney. Defendants can vary. An imaginary trial of Adolf Hitler could lead to some interesting arguments and insights, although it may be difficult to arrange a reasonably fair trial for *der Fuehrer*. Students might attempt a reenactment of the Nuremberg Trials, complete with Goering, Hess, Speer, et al. A more unique approach to a mock trial might target Allied leaders as defendants. For example, the architects of the Dresden bombing (Operation Thunderclap) could be placed on trial. Or government officials responsible for denying the *Saint Louis'* entry into America could be tried for indirect complicity in the Holocaust. As a counterpoint to the Nuremberg Trials, those in charge of the

Japanese-American internment program might also be tried. A mock trial activity requires mature students, careful planning, and a fair amount of class time.

Creative writing activities can also stimulate student insights into the Holocaust. One very effective method is to have students use photographs or artwork as a basis for creative writing. The teacher can post a variety of images on the wall or bulletin board then allow students to choose one as a starting point for a story or character study. Some very powerful photographic images from the Holocaust are available. If a photograph captures a moment of action, students might write a story or description of events leading up to the moment of the photograph or, conversely, events that occur just after the photograph was taken. Photographic portraits can be the subject of an imaginative character ' study or poem. Inanimate objects also provide fertile ground for creative prose or poetry. Rabbi Joseph Edelheit, of Minneapolis' Temple Israel Synagogue, suggested the possibilities implicit in a photograph of a Zyklon-B canister. What stories might surround the manufacture of the canister or the man who opened it for its sinister purpose? Other images, such as a pile of shoes or eyeglasses taken from death camp prisoners, could also be the subject of student prose or poetry. This creative writing approach can be applied to the large gallery of Holocaust artwork as well. By forcing students to consider the possibilities implied within the simplest of images, creative writing activities may help students to gain a new perspective on the Holocaust.

Personal survivor accounts as related by speakers are the most valuable means by which teachers can help to personalize the Holocaust for his or her class. Sadly, the number of survivors is diminishing and will soon be lost forever as a living resource. Whenever possible, educators should invite Holocaust survivors into the classroom to

share their experiences with young people. For six years now, our school has been honored with such a speaker. Cantor Leo Fettman from Omaha visits my American Heritage classroom each March. His visit transcends the Holocaust experience. In his talk, Cantor Fettman discusses the importance of education, respect for life, as well as the need to dignify cultural, racial, or religious differences. Students previously unfamiliar with the Jewish faith gain insights into Judaic traditions. Leo's gentle good humor puts the class at ease, while his accounts of the Holocaust experience reinforce the impact of the Final Solution's human cost. Perhaps this is a sacrilegious statement for an educator to make, but I believe my students learn more in one day from Cantor Fettman's visit than they do from me in an entire semester. Survivors are a powerful and vital resource and should be invited into our schools to bear witness to generations increasingly distanced by time from one of history's darkest nightmares.

Concluding Thoughts

As mentioned in my opening paragraph, teaching the Holocaust is challenging within the tight parameters dictated by public secondary education. I find it particularly problematic to incorporate the Holocaust into my American literature class, although I do have the luxury of a two-period time block shared with the U.S. history teacher. Still, I believe the Holocaust *does* have a justifiable place within the American literature/ history curriculum, despite claims by many that the Shoah is strictly a "European" event. Furthermore, I believe that an eclectic approach to the Holocaust *will* reinforce the universality of its moral conflicts. Human folly, cruelty, and intolerance, are universal traits. The Holocaust originated and was largely orchestrated in a nation responsible for some of Western civilization's greatest scientific, philosophical, and artistic

achievements. If such a monumental horror could occur in Germany, then any nation on earth is equally susceptible to the mentality that produced a Hitler and attempted a Final Solution. As survivors gradually fade into the mists of time, educators must carry the torch in teaching the profound lessons to be learned from the Holocaust.

**Workshop on the Holocaust and Contemporary Genocide
Unit Plan: Implementing the Holocaust in American Literature and History
Outcomes, Materials, Activities, and Evaluations**

--- APPENDIX ---

This appendix includes:

- 1) A unit plan for teaching the Holocaust in a junior-level American literature/history course.**

- 2) Copies of shorter literary works discussed in the previous pages:**
 - a) "38 People Who Saw Murder" (Gansburg)**
 - b) "Conscientious Objector" (St. Vincent Millay)**
 - c) "next to of course god america i" (Cummings)**
 - d) Proposition 87**
 - e) Fetal Tissue Bill**
 - f) "The Shawl" (Ozick)**
 - g) "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" (LeGuin)**
 - h) Overview of Nietzschean philosophy**
 - i) Basic Existentialism**

UNIT PLAN FOR TEACHING THE HOLOCAUST

During the course of this unit, TLW (the learner will):

- **assess the individual's role when faced with public immorality;**
- **connect an expository essay to a historical events;**
- **debate the legality versus the morality of selected legislation;**
- **trace the origins of European antisemitism;**
- **describe events leading to the rise of fascism in post-WWI Europe;**
- **analyze America's social and foreign policy in the 1930s;**
- **judge a America's response to Hitler's persecution of the Jews;**
- **evaluate and interpret the language of a Nazi legal document;**
- **identify the elements of genocide in the Holocaust or other atrocities;**
- **compare/contrast the Holocaust with other genocidal movements;**
- **summarize the effects of the Holocaust on survivors and their children;**
- **write a fictional scene based on a Holocaust-related image.**
- **critique an author's use of animal imagery in depicting Holocaust events;**
- **identify and discuss elements of Existentialism in selected literary works;**
- **compare the methods and impact of a genocide with a massacre;**
- **conduct a mock trial of Nazi leaders;**
- **create solutions to prevent the occurrence of future genocides;**
- **design memorial to the victims of a genocide or massacre;**
- **demonstrate knowledge of the Holocaust via an exam.**

TIME FRAME: Six to eight weeks, incorporated into a World War II unit, junior-level integrated American history and literature course.

SUGGESTED READINGS:

- E. E. Cummings.** "next to of course god america i." *Literature and Language: American Literature*. New York: McDougal-Littell 1992.
- Gansburg, Martin.** "38 Who Saw Murder." *Prose Models*. New York: HarcourtBrace Jovanovich 1987 (also available as "37 People Who Saw Murder Didn't Call the Police" in *Literature and Language: American Literature*. New York: McDougal-Littell 1992).
- Guterson, David.** *Snow Falling on Cedars*. New York: Vintage Books 1995.
- Hersey, John.** *Hiroshima*. New York: Vintage Books 1989.
- Houston, Jeanne Wakatsuki, and James D. Houston.** *Farewell to Manzanar*. New York: Houghton Mifflin 1973.
- LeGuin, Ursula K.** "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas" from *The Wind's Twelve Quarters*. New York: Harper 8G Row 1973.
- Ozick, Cynthia.** "The Shawl." *The Holocaust: A Historical Reader* (Nexttext series). New York: McDougal-Littell 2000.
- Roth, John.** "On Losing Trust in the World." *Holocaust: Religious and Philosophical Implications*. St. Paul, MN: Paragon House 1989.
- Spiegelman, Art.** *Maus, A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History*. New York: Pantheon Books 1991.
- *Maus n, A Survivor's Tare: And Here My Troubles Began*. New York: Pantheon Books 1991.
- St. Vincent Millay, Edna.** "Conscientious Objector." *Literature and Language: American Literature*. New York: McDougal-Littell, 1992.
- Styron, William.** *Sophie's Choice*. New York: Bantam Books 1,980.
- Vonnegut, Kurt.** *Slaughterhouse-Five*. New York: Dell Publishing 1968.

SELECTED VIDEOS:

- "America and the Holocaust" from *The American Experience* series. PBS. KTIN, Johnston, IA. Spring 1999. One hour.

"The Master Race" from The *People's Century* series. PBS. KTIN, Johnston, IA. Fall 1999. One hour.

***Schindler's List*. Dir. Steven Spielberg. Universal, 1993. 194 minutes.**

"Untitled." Dir. Seth Kramer, (United States) n.d., n.p. 15 minutes.

ACTIVITIES/ RELATED CONTENT:

- **Student congress debate: legislation on special license plates for social "undesirables" and fetal tissue/human organ banks.**
- **Monument design and construction: create and build a model to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust or other genocides/massacres.**
- **Overview of Existentialist philosophy, as well as Nietzsche's influence on Nazi ideology.**
- **Creative writing activities: imaginative character studies based on selected images from the Holocaust.**
- **Mock trial: options include a trial of Hitler, or of Allied leaders responsible for the bombings of Dresden and Hiroshima.**
- **Guest speaker: Holocaust survivor or survivor's child shares his or her experiences with the class.**

Conscientious Objector

Edna St. Vincent Millay

I shall die, but that is all that I shall do for Death.

I hear him leading his horse out of the stall; I hear the clatter on the barn-floor.
He is in haste; he has business in Cuba, business in the Balkans, many calls to
make this morning.

But I will not hold the bridle while he cinches the girth.
And he may mount by himself; I will not give him a leg up.

Though he flick my shoulders with his whip, I will not tell him which way the
fox ran. With his hoof on my breast, I will not tell him where the black boy hides
in the swamp. I shall die, but that is all that I shall do for Death; I am not on his
pay-roll.

I will not tell him the whereabouts of my friends nor of my enemies either.
Though he promise me much, I will not map him the route to any man's door.
Am I a spy in the land of the living, that I should deliver men to Death?
Brother, the password and the plans of our city are safe with me; never through
me
Shall you be overcome.

"next to of course god america i"

E. E. Cummings

"next to of course god america i
love you land of the pilgrims' and so forth oh
say can you see by the dawn's early my
country `tis of centuries come and go
and are no more what of it we should worry
in very language even deaf and dumb
thy sons acclaim your glorious name by gorry
by jingo by gee by gosh by gum
why talk of beauty what could be more beautiful
than these heroic happy dead
who rushed like lions to the roaring slaughter
they did not stop to think they died instead
then shall the voice of liberty be mute?"

He spoke. And drank rapidly a glass of water

PROPOSITION 87

Be it enacted by the Senate in Student Congress here assembled that:

Section 1. A task force consisting of distinguished law enforcement and health officials shall be formed; this special commission will target "at-risk" populations now living within United States borders.

Section 2. After the National Health and Security Task Force has compiled a list of persons who pose possible health and safety risks to society, a system of color-coded license plates shall be created. This new system will permit law enforcement and health agencies to effectively track "at-risk" populations.

Section 3. Those persons included on the NHSTF list will be distinguished from the standard population via the following coding system:

Orange plate (with code VIO + ID number) shall be issued to those free individuals with a record of violent crime; i.e., rape, assault, child abuse, sexual assault, pedophiles, etc.

Yellow plate (with code DU + ID) shall be issued to those persons previously charged and convicted of any drug-related offense.

Blue plate (with code ALC + ID) shall be issued to any individual with a previous DWI (driving while intoxicated) conviction. Those persons with a record of other alcohol-related offenses will be issued a similar license plate.

Green plate (with code MSD + TD) to be issued to any person formerly charged and convicted with a previous misdemeanor offense.

Black plate (with code FEL + ID) for those persons with a record of any felony crime.

Red plate (with code ILL + ID) to be issued to any individual determined to be the earner of a communicable disease of a type that could pose a threat to the general populace.

Pink plate (with code ALT + ID) will be issued to those persons known to practice an alternative lifestyle.

White plate (with code NRML + ID) to be issued to those individuals determined by the NHSTF to pose no risk to our national well-being.

Section 4. Those who do not possess a drivers' license will be required to wear arm bands coded in a fashion similar to the aforementioned license plate system. Those list under the "white" category will be exempt from wearing arm bands.

Section 5. After a ten year period, those listed in the "white" category will be eligible for a tax rebate not exceeding flue percent of his or her gross income over the ten year period. *This* rebate may be retained by the citizen in a tax-free account to accrue five percent interest annually, or it may be collected immediately by the eligible citizen. Color-coded "at-risk" individuals are ineligible for *this* tax incentive.

Fetal Tissue Bill

Be it enacted by this Student Congress here assembled that:

Section One: Recent surgical experiments in other nations have shown dramatic improvement in the treatment of Parkinson's Disease victims by grafting tissue from a miscarried fetus into the brains of Parkinson's Disease sufferers.

Section Two: Medical research indicates that Alzheimer's Disease may be similarly treated with dramatic results.

Section Three: Thousands of Americans are in a comatose state, with many considered "brain dead" by every legal definition of sentient thought.

Section Four: Thousands of other Americans are included on waiting lists for heart transplants or other organ transplants. Under the current system, there is a vast short of available organ donors.

Section Five: Furthermore, each year thousands of American women choose to abort their fetuses.

Section Six: Aborted fetuses can contribute to the social good by considered legally acceptable for medical treatment of Parkinson's Disease or Alzheimer's Disease.

Section Seven: Additionally, severely brain-damaged, comatose patients could serve the social good by *functioning as* organ banks for the needy.

Section Eight: Women who contribute aborted fetuses for medical purposes shall receive monetary compensation for their contribution.

Section Nine: Parents, guardians, or those legally responsible for the aforementioned brain-damaged patients shall also receive compensation upon transferring their legal responsibility to a medical institution for use as an organ bank or other medical purpose. Financial compensation shall be commensurate with the amount of organs, limbs, or tissue used for treatment.

Nietzsche believed that modern culture is creak, decadent, and fed by lies. Through his philosophy, Nietzsche attempted to provoke modern men and women into challenging traditional values and institutions.

“GOD IS DEAD.”

- Science, technology, and Darwinian theory have undermined traditional Christianity to the point at which we can say "God is dead."
- Traditional Christian values and a bourgeois mentality stifle individual excellence.
- Christianity, with its emphasis on sacrifice and redemption, is life-denying. The basic attributes of Christianity are cruelty and pain.
- Christianity (and democracy) encourage mediocrity, not excellence.
- A life-affirming philosophy is necessary to replace Christianity.

APOLLONIAN VERSUS DIONYSIAN

- Art is the interplay between two contending elements.
- The Apollonian side of the human psyche= light, reason, culture, form, order, restraint, civilized.
- Dionysian= chaos, irrational, darkness, Intoxication, abandon, primal.
- Creative endeavors can only be accomplished when the Apollonian side:
 - a) acknowledges the Dionysian forces;
 - b) pacifies and subdues the Dionysian side;
 - c) creates form and artistic beauty from chaos;
- All higher human achievements originate from irrational sources.

MASTER VERSUS SLAVE MORALITY

- An absolute, universal code of morality does not exist. Traditional moral systems disregard individual differences.
- Two types of morality exist: Slave Morality and Master Morality:
 - a) Slave Morality= the abased, oppressed, those who are uncertain of themselves. There is a utilitarian morality, meant to help others who are weak and powerless. Slave morality focuses on the denial of life's sad influences "slaves" to adopt a "herd mentality."
 - b) Master Morality= acts from a feeling of power; uses his power to benefit the unfortunate. Practitioners of this morality do not look beyond themselves to determine right/wrong or good/evil. It is acceptable to glorify oneself; the "master" takes delight in subjecting himself to higher standards.

THE WILL TO POWER AND THE SUPERMAN

- Most people are dominated by a drive to dominate the environment, a "will to power" reflected in the expression of a person's powers or abilities.
- The ultimate expression of the Will to Power is shaven through the individual's creation of his/her own moral code, unrestrained by traditional values.
- The Superman or Overman (Urbemensch) will reflect the ultimate individual manifestation of the Will to Power. He is "beyond" traditional "good and evil."

MODERN LITERATURE: Existentialism

Existentialist philosophy originated in the 19th century through the works of Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. The concept was developed further in the 20th century in the writings of Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus.

"Be careful when you look into the abyss; the abyss is looking back at you..."
--Nietzsche

VERY BASIC EXISTENTIALISM:

- A) IN THE UNIVERSE, ONLY DEATH IS STABLE OR CERTAIN.
- B) THE UNIVERSE IS A VOID WITHOUT MEANING.
- C) LIKE THE UNIVERSE, MAN'S LIFE IS ALSO (POTENTIALLY) WITHOUT MEANING.
- D) "EXISTENCE PRECIDES ESSENCE.- FIRST WE EXIST. THEN WE CREATE OUR OWN INDIVIDUAL ESSENCE, OR MEANING FOR OUR EXISTENCE BY WHICH WE CAN DEFINE OUR LIVES).
- E) BY REJECTING TRADITIONAL ESSENCES (RELIGIONS. SCIENCES, PHILOSOPHIES, etc.), THE EXISTENTIALIST ACKNOWLEDGES HIS EXISTENCE AS A NOTHINGNESS. DEATH IS THE FINAL. NOTHINGNESS.
- F) IN ORDER TO COPE IN AN EMPTY UNIVERSE, ONE MUST MAKE CHOICES.
- G) WE CREATE OUR OWN MEANING FOR LIFE FROM THE CHOICES WE MAKE.
- H) THE ESSENTIAL QUALITIES OF AN INDIVIDUAL ARE DETERMINED BY FREE WILL, NOT BY HEREDITY AND ENVIRONMENT. HUMANS ARE FREE TO CHOOSE BUT NOT FREE NOT TO CHOOSE.
- I) BY BECOMING COMMITTED TO ONESELF, A PERSON CAN ALTER HIS HUMAN CONDITION AND EASE HIS DESPAIR.
- J) MANY OF EXISTENTIALISM'S TERMS BEGIN WITH THE LETTER "A":
 - ANGST/ANXIETY = THE FEELING PRODUCED BY THE BASIC EMPTINESS OF THE UNIVERSE.

- ALIENATION = THE ESSENTIAL ISOLATION OF EACH PERSON BECAUSE OF HIS INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY TO CHOOSE WHAT/WHOM HE IS.
- ABSURDITY = THE WORLD IS ABSURD BECAUSE IT HAS NO MEANING; OUR LIVES ARE ABSURD BECAUSE WE DIE.
- ANTI-HERO = THE FICTIONAL CHARACTER WHO MUST FUNCTION ALONE AMIDST THE ABSURD HUMAN CONDITION.
- AUTHENTICITY = OUR LIVES HAVE AUTHENTICITY IF WE CONTINUE TO MAKE OUR OWN CHOICES AND STICK BY THOSE CHOICES.