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Understanding in the Absence of Meaning: Coming of Age Narratives of the Holocaust

Theresa Rogers, University of British Columbia

Abstract

This working paper explores recent debates about teaching the Holocaust through literary representations written for and read by adolescents, asking how we can witness this event without idealizing or mythologizing victims and without necessarily ascribing coherent meaning to their experiences. Holocaust memoirs, such as the *Diary of a Young Girl*, by Anne Frank and *Night* by Elie Wiesel, are now being supplemented by more recent works that employ different narrative strategies and call for new forms of witnessing in classrooms and for new ways of reading the Holocaust. A final version of this paper was published in *The New Advocate*, Vol 15, No 4, (2002) and is printed here with the permission of Christopher-Gordon Publishers, Inc.

Introduction

In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in how young adults can witness traumatic historical events, such as the Holocaust, through memoir and fiction (e.g., Baer, 2000; Britzman, 2000; Kertzer, 1999; Ozick, 2000; Russell, 1997). This critical work has begun to ask more difficult questions about how the Holocaust can be rendered for younger readers without mythologizing or idealizing its victims and without necessarily ascribing coherent meaning(s) to their experiences particularly when those victims came of age in the context of deportation and concentration camps during World War II.

One site of this debate is a piece of literature most commonly read by adolescents during their middle or secondary school years -- *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank.[1] After many years of being read as a narrative of innocence and optimism, recent arguments have swirled around the work, disrupting its status as an exemplar of literary representations of the Holocaust experience for young adults and examining the ways in which Anne Frank's story has been rewritten, becoming a "subversion of history."

In her recent biography of Anne Frank, which received much press for including a description of the pages that were taken out of the most commonly used version of the diary, Melissa Muller (1998) writes:

Over the past fifty years, Ann Frank has become a universal symbol of the oppressed in a world of violence and tyranny. Her name invokes humanity, tolerance, human rights, and democracy; her image is the epitome of optimism and the will to live. Millions of people have felt kinship with her and revere her as a heroine. Her diary -- required reading in schools throughout the world -- has

[1] It has been often pointed out that the *Diary* is outsold world-wide only by the Bible in the non-fiction category.

been interpreted as an eternal testament of courage and hope, relevant to all. Some of the things she wrote have acquired near proverbial status, and -- often taken out of context -- they have been used as slogans for any number of points of view. If there were Jewish saints, someone would probably have long since proposed her beatification (p. ix).

As Miep Geis, the woman who is credited with hiding the Franks and recovering the diary, has also noted, "Anne cannot and should not stand for the many individuals who were robbed of their lives" (cited by Mueller, 1988, p. 305). Cynthia Ozick, novelist and essayist, would agree. In her recent collection of essays, *Quarrel and Quandary* (2000), she writes: "... the diary itself, richly crammed through it is with incident and passion, cannot count as Anne Frank's story. A story may not be said to be a story if the end is missing. And because the end is missing, the story of Anne Frank in the fifty years since *The Diary of a Young Girl* was first published has been bowdlerized, distorted, transmuted, traduced, reduced; It has been infantilized, Americanized, homogenized, sentimentalized; falsified, kitschified, and, in fact, blatantly and arrogantly denied...A deeply truth-telling work has been turned into an instrument of partial truth, surrogate truth, or anti-truth...Almost every hand that has approached the diary with the well-meaning intention of publicizing it has contributed to the subversion of history" (pp. 77-78).

As Ozick goes on to argue, the book is often hailed as a tribute to the human spirit, a song to life, -- in which the most often quoted line is "I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart" as opposed to passages such as "I see the world being transformed into a wilderness, I hear the approaching thunder that, one day, will destroy us, too..." In other words, as a Holocaust document, the *Diary of A Young Girl* it is an incomplete testimony; and in some sense is only completed in Bergen-Belsen, where Anne Frank died, covered with lice, and suffering from Typhus, some weeks before the end of W.W.II. Lawrence Langer, in his introduction to *Art from the ashes* (1995) explains why he does not include the Diary in his collection: "Those who would convert death in Auschwitz or Bergen-Belsen into a triumph of love over hate feed deep and obscure needs in themselves having little to do with the truth...the best Holocaust literature gazes into the depths without flinching (p 7)."

A recent television film based on Mueller's biography and produced by the Walt Disney company attempts to finish Anne Frank's story by including footage of her family's relocation to a Dutch camp and her deportation first to Auschwitz and then to Bergen-Belsen where, in the last scene, she is seen emaciated and covered with sores, and holding her dead sister. However, as Julie Salamon argues in the *New York Times*, this version is told without vilifying the perpetrators and with a kind of lingering "contemporary wishy-washy humanism" and simple moralism (Salamon, 2001). And while Mueller's biography and the movie re-insert the elided images of Anne Frank's sexual awakening and her perception of her parents' marriage (Mueller, 1998, p. 274),

there is no actual language used from the diary thus erasing her voice and, again perhaps, subverting history.[2]

Anne Frank, destined to never to have final control over her own words, memories, or her body, even before her deportation, chose to edit her own voice across her two years in hiding, particularly with respect to her initial explorations of her body which she viewed a year later with embarrassment, inscribing shame onto her body like so many adolescent girls learn to do: "I forgot to mention the important news that I am probably going to get my period soon. I can tell because I keep finding a whitish smear in my panties... [*The diary of a young girl: The definitive edition*, 1995, Nov. 2nd 1942]... I wouldn't be able to write that kind of thing anymore. Now that I am re-reading my diary after a year and a half, I'm surprised at my childish innocence...it embarrasses me greatly.... [Jan. 22, 1944]".

In short, Anne Frank's story, contrary to how it has been represented as a coherent narrative of triumph, hope and innocence is now seen as a story with no settled meaning or ending. If, as Otto Frank once commented, the Diary may be no more than a story of adolescence, how can it now be re-historicized and understood as a Holocaust document" As Debra Britzman (2000) in her compelling chapter, asks, how can we craft significance from how Anne Frank has been represented (p.9) without "a profound idealization of adolescent yearning, where Anne Franks "voice is often taken as a capable of transcending or even redeeming the very history that cut her life short?" (p. 17). Drawing on a psychoanalytic perspective, Britzman argues that if "the story cannot end..." the Diary, read in the context of "all its historicity" requires us to not only understand changing structures of engagement for each generation of readers, but also the role of trauma in pedagogy; that is, teachers and students resisting simple understandings to become ethical subjects as witnesses to loss as we mourn Anne and her unfinished story.

Witnessing Narratives of the Holocaust

Felman and Laub (1992), in their book, *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, argue that the trauma of the Shoa creates a "crisis of witnessing" -- that is, as an historical event, it either eliminated its witnesses physically, or through its unspeakability, incomprehensibility and dehumanizing effects. Survivors are or were kept silent through personal and communal denial, cultural reticence or cultural canonization (xix). This crisis of witnessing creates a complex set of issues in terms of memorializing and teaching the event in all its complexity. Felman and Laub argue for complementary processes of contextualizing the texts of the Holocaust and textualizing the context" suggesting that listeners take on some of the responsibility of witnessing that narrators otherwise bear alone.

Similarly, James Young, in his recent book *At Memory's Edge: After Images of the Holocaust in contemporary art and architecture* (2000), argues that a possible response lies in our willingness to examine both what happened *and* how what happened

[2] The Anne Frank Fonds threatened to sue ABC over copyright if the language of the Diary was used (Time Magazine, May 21, 2001, p. 57). Otto Frank, in editing the Diary "omitted Anne's tirades about her mother and Fritz Pfeffer, as well as all references to her sexual awakening" (Mueller, 1998, p. 274).

has been passed down to us. In the book, he chronicles recent attempts in Germany to memorialize the Holocaust, providing examples of attempts by artists to create what he calls anti-memorials -- ones that slowly disappear, or that represent loss through empty spaces, or spaces that do not connect to each other. These artists have attempted, he contends, to create a way for the burden of memory to rest with the visitors to these sites -- to make visitors witnesses.

In discussing the now familiar debate about whether art can come from atrocity, and whether it runs the risk of being redemptive by ascribing the kinds of meaning and significance associated with narrative (e.g. Adorno, 1965; Friedlander, 1993), Young reminds us of Friedlander's call for an aesthetics that devotes itself the dilemmas of representation, "an antiredemptory history of the Holocaust that resists closure, sustains uncertainty, and allows us to live without full understanding" (p. 6)

In this post-Holocaust age, in which much witnessing will soon rely symbolic memorials and on written testimonies "on texts that are sometimes fragmentary, textualized, and whose narrators are in many ways not completely reliable -- many questions arise when we consider the ways in which classrooms might become sites for taking on the difficult pedagogy of such an event through literature. How can we move toward presenting a more complicated understanding of the young victims of the Holocaust through examinations of literary representations" How do we find ways to remember without mythologizing or idealizing, without seeking redemption, or catharsis, or some kind of finished representation of what it means to come of age during the Holocaust "And how do we do this in the face of efforts to protect some kind of imagined innocence of both young victims and contemporary adolescent readers"

The Boundaries of Young Adult Literature: Coming of Age in the Holocaust

Literature written for or read by young adults has no fixed definitions or boundaries. What arbitrary lines are drawn between young adult and adult literature are drawn more for administrative or economic purposes by libraries and publishers than for readers (Walter, 1993). Some would argue that this category is marked by child or young adult protagonists, a simplicity of style, archetypal plots (e.g. McDowell, 1973; Nodelman, 1985), and, in some cases, the authors "intention to write for younger audiences (e.g. Hunt, 1991). Yet, as Kertzer (1999) argues, Holocaust literature renders all definitions of children's literature problematic, in that these works for children and young adults seem to exist outside of any historical variations in presenting of evil. She adds that Holocaust memoirs for young adults, in particular, disrupt the boundaries between children's and adult reading since fictional accounts function to explain what adult books claim as inexplicable, whereas memoir, especially those of Auschwitz, presents to young readers that which is incoherent and inconclusive; thus "...the Holocaust mocks our belief in any clear relationship between maturity and understanding." (Kertzer, 1999, p. 241). Narrating the center of the Holocaust, that is narrating Auschwitz, she contends, is often avoided in stories for children and young adults because there is no heroism, no victory, no hope to be found there; traditional structures of narrative fall apart or are rejected.

Yet, in both recent coming of age memoirs and fiction of the Holocaust, the distinctions between narrative structure may have less to do with literary genres and their

fluid boundaries, given they are all literary representations, than with changing understandings of how the Holocaust may now be represented given the dilemmas of passing into a "post-memory" (Young, 2000) generation. Traditional narrative structures may need to be altered or even abandoned, as with other symbolic memorials of the Holocaust, for young adults no less than adult readers.

Night by Elie Wiesel (1982, first published in 1960) is perhaps the most widely read Holocaust memoir read in schools, apart from the *Diary of a young girl* although it was not intended for a young adult audience at the time of publication, or apparently even now.[3] In a recent talk to eighth graders in New York City, Wiesel (Sachs, 1998) said: "I rarely speak to children your age...I speak to university students, who are already mature. And I'm not sure I like this, because the story you want to hear is a story filled with pain, and something in me resists. Why should I give you pain? You are entitled to joy." It is also interesting to note that *Night* has often been mistakenly referred to as a novel (e.g. *Time Magazine* Book Review, 1958) and more recently described as "technically a novel" on Amazon.com (Schleier, 1999). In that sense, while it offers no hope, heroism, or victory, *Night* reads like a shaped and coherent narrative, unlike more fragmented memoirs and oral testimonies.[4]

What this narrative provides is the description of the loss of childhood in the trauma of the Holocaust. Upon arriving at Berkenau, where he was beaten, humiliated by nudity, disinfecting, and prison dress, Wiesel writes, that at 15, "I too had become a different person...the child that I was, had been consumed in flames. A dark flame had

[3] Wiesel is credited with coining the term, Holocaust.

[4] How else can a memoir of coming of age in the center of the Holocaust be told? While it has not yet found its way into schools, Paul Steinberg's more recently published memoir, *Speak You Also*, (2000, first published in 1996) tells of similar losses - of childhood, of parenting, and his dignity: "I lived and am still living in humiliation" (p.162). Yet his story is told differently. It is framed as a kind of answer or "alibi" in reference to earlier memoirs, particularly that of Primo Levi, with what has been described as an ironic tone and "gallows" humor (Powell, 2001; Bernstein, 2000). Steinberg was 16 when he was arrested in Paris and sent to Auschwitz, and 18 when freed from Buchenwald. He refers to this as his years "attending Auschwitz" (p. 39) as if in boarding school (p. 161). "To survive, I'd had to cross in just a few weeks the gulf that separates adolescence, that period of apprenticeship and dependence, from adulthood, when you have to look out for yourself and decide from day to day how around by events, I decided to become a player in the game, first on my own behalf, afterward for others. (p. 105). Throughout this narrative, Steinberg admits that much of what he describes is beyond what he wants to share: "I despair of bringing it to life in the mind of a sane human being" (p. 23). What he writes is fragmentary, unsparing, and by his own admission, unreliable, yet it "gazes into the depths without flinching." Early in the memoir, Steinberg writes: "Memory is kind to us, beneficent. It muddles certain areas, erases things here and there (p. 14)) Near the end, he writes: "I'll probably be one of the last to bear witness, the one whose recollections have "settled" the most. The filter of memory has played its role, letting slip through a mixture of the essential, the incidental, the anecdotal - a selection determined by no apparent logic except, perhaps, the instinct of self-preservation" (p. 160). This "play of memory and imagination" could not have been written 50 or even 25 years ago - "I think fifty years provide a decent perspective (p. 157)." In contrast to Wiesel's critical stance toward his own telling of his story, Steinberg, with only a whisper of guilt, asks us, the readers, the witnesses to his admittedly unreliable telling, "Is it so wrong to survive?" (p...).

entered my soul and devoured it" (p. 34). Eventually, Wiesel also lost his father, first figuratively through an inability to protect and parent, and then literally through death. Finally, at the end of the story, he writes: "From the depths of the mirror, a corpse gazed back at me" (p. 109). Even now Wiesel worries that he did not tell his story right: He tells the same students in New York (Sachs, 1998): "...if my peers and I had really told the story as it should have been told, many things would be different in the world today."

Wiesel both questions the way his story was told and, more interestingly, appears to want to shield his young audience from this representation of his own coming of age narrative. In a post-Holocaust age, in which all coming of age testimonies will be second hand and textual, how do we know what literary works (memoir and fiction) to share with young adults to teach us about the Holocaust in uncompromising and complex ways? What is the significance of a first hand account in relation to those that are and will be written by a post-Holocaust generation and how might we witness them differently? What do we, and our students, seek to understand from these texts, in the absence of coherent meaning?

Three works of Holocaust literature for young adults: *No Pretty Pictures*, *The Final Journey* and *Briar Rose*.

According to Lawrence Langer (1975), the themes of the literature of atrocity are "the displacement of the consciousness of life by the imminence and pervasiveness of death; the violation of the coherence of childhood; the assault on physical reality; the disintegration of the rational intelligence; and the disruption of chronological time (xii). These themes are as clearly discernible in various forms and combinations in those works we label as "young adult literature." The three works discussed here are all understood to be intended for young adult, although that status has been contested at least in one case.[5] *No Pretty Pictures* (1998), by Anita Lobel, won the national book award for Young People's Literature; *Briar Rose* (1992) by Jane Yolen is on the American Library Association's Best Book for Young Adults list, and *The Final Journey* (1992) was published in 1998 in the U.S. under a children's imprint and has been reviewed as a young adult novel. All of these works center on the experiences of young women coming of age in the Holocaust, thus the play of themes can be seen as gendered representations of the Holocaust experience.

No Pretty Pictures

[5] Jane Yolen wrote *Briar Rose* as an adult novel and won the 1993 Mythopoeic Fantasy Award for Adult Literature, and, because of its gay character, was one of three books burned on the steps of the Kansas City Board of Education by a religious group in opposition to allowing young adults access to it. In response, she defends the right of young adults to choose their own reading (Yolen, FACT: First Amendment Cyber-Tribune, July 1995).

Anita Lobel opens her memoir, *No Pretty Pictures: A child of war*, "I was born in Krakow, Poland. In a wrong place at a wrong time." The story begins when she is five years old and chronicles, with graphic descriptions, years of running and hiding with her eccentric and even anti-Semitic nanny who was devoted to protecting her and her younger brother. Nonetheless, they are eventually caught while hiding in a convent, and spend time in a concentration camp they barely escape. In this memoir, Lobel often captures the perspective of childhood as if she has physically returned to it, although it is written more than fifty years later, years mostly spent in the U.S. In this way she captures the rawness of the experiences and the inexplicability of what happened to her, and the failure of many grown-ups to keep children safe. But in doing so, she rejects the mantle of victim then or now, closing the narrative in the language reminiscent of fairy tales: "In the end, what is there to say? I was born far, far away, on a bloody continent at a terrible time. I lived there for a while. I live here now. My love for this country grows with my years. My life has been good. I want more. Mine is only another story."

What Lobel does here is allows us to enter and witness her childhood -- by removing layers of narrative representation and leaving us as close as possible to her experiences and she now remembers them. We participate in her story and she provides limited attempts to explain it to us. There are few explanations for her attachment to her odd Nanny yet the irony is not lost on readers. She also explains little about her lack of connection to her own parents when reunited, having already come of age in Swedish sanatoriums, more concerned with her shame of being "an ugly, obvious Jewish girl" among the blond Swedes.

In the Epilogue, Lobel recalls the "shame of being watched by a young man while standing naked" as she was bathed by her cousin at a concentration camp, and imagines how the women she knew fared, such as her grandmother: "I was ten years old when I climbed on to a boxcar transport. I think of my grandmother on one of those trains. Almost certainly separated from Grandfather, she had to have been crammed, sorted, pushed in to the barracks with hundreds of other women, shouted at, forced to take off her clothes. Somewhere the old woman who had made her daughters learn proper German had been stripped naked and shoved and humiliated by strapping young German soldiers...I can picture it. I will never know" (p. 190). In memoirs by both men and women who were children in the Holocaust we read about the humiliation of nakedness (c.f. Steinberg, 2000, p. 11-12), but for women it is often the shame of their female bodies being paraded in front of Nazi soldiers.

Reviews of this award-winning memoir often refer to rawness of memory conveyed and to "the message that there is no meaning in this suffering" (*New York Times*, 1998) or "the lack of irony or complete understanding" (*Amazon.com*) or the perspective of "a child who does not fully comprehend what she is witnessing" (*Horn book*, 1998). This understanding is left to young readers who are constructed by the narrative as capable of understanding these experiences.

The Final Journey

Originally published in Germany, *The Final Journey* by Gudrun Pausewang was translated by Patricia Crampton and published in England in 1996, and then published in the U.S. as a book for young readers in 1998. The novel chronicles an 11-year-old girl's

hiding and then transport in a cattle car with 50 other people to Auschwitz, where she is led to the showers. It also chronicles Alice's loss of her grandfather, her last caretaker, and her sudden sexual awakening. She learns how babies are made and witnesses a birth among the filth of the train car: Once she had asked grandmother how children came into the world. She had wanted to know exactly. It had been only a few weeks ago, but Grandmother had waved her aside: "Later, child, later..."

"The baby comes out between her legs", said Ruben (p.36).

Another girl in the train tutors Alice: "Have you got your periods yet? Whispered Rebekka...Oh child do you have to everything explained to you?...I'm getting sick of it. "All the same, she explained what periods were, and Alice could not believe her ears... "Until you have your periods, you're still a child," Rebekka whispered, (p. 65)

Just days later, moments before she is to be gassed, Alice feels the shame of the naked women around her, and begins menstruating for the first time.

Again, in this case for a young girl who reaches sexual maturity just before she is murdered, we witness the suddenness of coming of age now recognizable in Holocaust literature "children reaching maturity before their time (Russell, 1997). In both memoir and fiction, children lose their parents and become their parents" caretakers and take on the blame for what befell their families (c.f. Baer, 2000). We also recognize the ways in which shame is represented on the bodies of women (Langer, 1998) and these become not only the unremitting themes of this literature, but these traumatic moments, devoid of hope, become the unanswerable pedagogies for young readers.

Briar Rose

Briar Rose, a novel by Jane Yolen, draws on the tale of Sleeping Beauty to narrate a Holocaust story. Rebecca, a young woman spent her childhood listening to an odd version of Briar Rose that her grandmother, Gemma, told over and over a memoir in fairy tale form within a novel. After her grandmother's death, Rebecca decides to investigate the roots of Gamma's story, which takes her back to Poland to the site of the camp at Chelmno. The "sleeping" turns out to be the effect of gassing, and the prince turns out to be a homosexual underground partisan who breathed life back into Gamma's lifeless body after rescuing her from a pile of dumped corpses. He has his own narrative of the events: Gemma became pregnant by another partisan in the group who was killed, but she apparently eventually made it safely to the one American refugee camp.

Like Yolen's other fantasy novel of the Holocaust, *The Devil's Arithmetic* (1998), *Briar Rose* has been reviewed both positively and negatively, focusing either on the successful use of fantasy to depict evil and terror or on the problems of integrating the various narrative structures and even attempting to mix fact and fantasy.

In a defense of the novel, Kertzer (1999) argues that we need to consider providing narrative strategies such as creating a double narrative respecting the need for hope while at the same time dashing it with the facts of history, such as in Yolen's epilogue: "This is a book of fiction. All the characters are made up. Happy-ever-after is a fairy tale notion, not history. I know of no woman who escaped Chelmno alive" (p. 202).

This narrative move calls to mind references found in the literature about the Holocaust that in the face of cruelty beyond the imagination of sane people, drawing on fantasy may be reasonable. As Walter (1993) has argued, "the topics of evil, death, and violence, which must figure in any accurate treatment of the Holocaust, have traditionally been reserved for the more allegorical and conventional treatment of the fairy tale, (p. 4). In a defense of the film, *Life is Beautiful*, David Bathrick (2000) equates the young protagonist's projected struggle to "break through the fairy tale cocoon" with the efforts of a post-Holocaust generation to "appropriate from the various traces of historical representation the knowledge of that ever receding event" (p. 1). In this way, he argues, Benini's film provide a critical re-reading of classic Hollywood films of the Shoa claiming to be master narratives that use narrative strategies of unity, motivation, linearity and closure. He asks, "What, finally does a focus on the representation of children in certain films about the Holocaust have to tell us about problems of remembering and memorializing on the part of larger Jewish and non-Jewish collectives" (p. 2). He answers, "Even primary memory by those who lived through the event invariably involves lapses connected to forms of denial, repression, wish fantasy, projection and evasion" (p.9)

Again, young adults are asked to cobble together an understanding of coming of age in the Holocaust from the remnants of a double narrative an odd love story, comprehensible, inside a larger incomprehensible and fractured historical narrative.

Final Thoughts

Teaching the Holocaust through literary representations may require us to turn away from some imagined innocence of both the victims and our students, avoiding the impulse to idealize the experience of coming of age in the center of the Shoa. This difficult pedagogy asks us and our students to understand the incomprehensible, incoherent, and meaningless suffering of adults and children.

In *Pre-empting the Holocaust*, Langer (1998) points out that "Trying to teach about a self constantly in danger of annihilation is a major test for Holocaust educators. Moreover, narratives featuring heroism, resistance, and spiritual uplift do little to help students enter the veiled space of the concealed self...As we approach the twenty-first century, the need grows more urgent for teachers to achieve a balance between the history of the catastrophe and the various ways of representing the private ordeals of its victims...Hence reading and teaching Holocaust literature requires a flexible stamina -one might even say courage - that few other subjects require" (p. 189-193).

It is somewhat surprising that at the end of this journey into Holocaust literature, I find myself in much the same place I began with regard to literature that deals with racism and genocide. In earlier work (Rogers, 1997, 1998) I argued that there is no "peaceful place" of straightforward teaching when we are engaged in exploring history and culture through literature; that if we are to overcome the resistance to critical fictions that tell help us to look at history in more complex ways, we will have to historicize those works, study the ways in which they are constructed, and learn to read in new ways. The work I have done on this piece deepens my commitment to these ideas, and arches toward a new level of participation in the literary representations filtered through the fractured

mirror (Seixas, 2000) of history if the Holocaust is to remain in the collective memory of post-Holocaust generations.

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