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Christine Coughlin
Providence College

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Christine Coughlin

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The Spiritual and Secular Effects of the Holocaust

World War II was a dark time in history filled with death and utter cruelty that left many people questioning humanity and the world they inhabited. One of the most disturbing, and most studied events of World War II is the Holocaust. The Holocaust was a disturbing period in history that had a lasting effect, not only on the victims, but on future generations as well. Two autobiographies “Night,” and “After Long Silence” written by Elie Wiesel and Helen Fremont respectively, each portray a different perspective on how the Holocaust had significance in the peoples’ lives, many as victims, and one as a daughter of survivors. Using these two autobiographies, as well as a number of articles referencing the Holocaust, it is clear that this chilling event in history shaped many people, both in their secular lives, as well as in their spiritual lives.

The Holocaust was the genocide of the Jewish population in many countries in Europe, by the Germans under the rule of Hitler. As an attack against a religious group of people, this traumatic event in history led to a significant change in the spiritual lives of many victims and their future children. Elie Wiesel uses his autobiography “Night” to express the spiritual change he underwent during the Holocaust, changing his view on God drastically. Before the events of the Holocaust took place, Wiesel was a deeply religious boy. He studied and practiced many Jewish traditions. At the age of thirteen, he was deeply spiritual and mature beyond his years in

regards to his faith. In his autobiography he writes: “I was almost thirteen and deeply observant. By day I studied the Talmud and by night I would run to the synagogue to weep over the destruction of the Temple” (Wiesel, 3). From the very beginning of his text, Wiesel made it clear that he was deeply religious for such a young boy. He was eager to learn more about Judaism and practice his religion in a more mature way; however, his father often opposed it, slowing him down, urging him to be more of a kid and to be patient with his spiritual growth. His father’s lack of encouragement for Wiesel’s spiritual growth did not deter him from his faith. Upon the invasion of the Germans, Wiesel did not stray from God right away. Instead, he simply imagined what his life would be like away from the home in which he practiced his faith for so many years before. Wiesel states: “I looked at my house in which I had spent years seeking my God, fasting to hasten the coming of the Messiah, imagining what my life would be like later” (Wiesel, 19). Wiesel was strong in his faith and adoration for God and Judaism. It is very likely that in his early, boy-hood days, Wiesel could not have imagined a day where he would see and experience such cruelty that it would lead him to lose faith in the God he cherished all those years. During Wiesel’s days in concentration camps, he began to reflect on how he spent Jewish holidays before the dark days he now faced. Wiesel remembers: “In days gone by Rosh Hashanah had dominated my life... In those days, I fully believed that the salvation of the world depended on every one of my deeds, on every one of my prayers” (Wiesel, 68). Prior to the events of the Holocaust, Wiesel took religious holidays such as Rosh Hashanah very seriously. He was a firm believer that his actions would determine the world’s salvation. However, during the Holocaust, after seeing people treat other people so maliciously, he began to question where God could possibly be in such a horrible situation.

It did not take long for Jewish people to see the horror of their fate in the concentration camps, and Wiesel is no exception. Even on his journey to the concentration camps, Wiesel began to see the horror he was about to face as he watched a woman become insane right in front of his eyes. However, this woman's insanity proved to be justifiable. Wiesel writes:

“Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, that turned my life into one long night seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke...Never shall I forget those flames that consumed my faith forever. Never shall I forget the nocturnal silence that deprived me for all eternity of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments that murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to ashes” (Wiesel, 34).

This statement, both powerful and disturbing, accurately portrays the terror that filled many Jews in just one night spent in a concentration camp. In just one night, Wiesel's religious decline began, as he watched his faith go up in smoke along with many Jews killed in the crematorium. It is understandable that Wiesel would begin to lose faith in God, and would begin to lose a desire to live upon seeing such a disturbing world. How could one wish to continue to live in a society where humans could treat other humans with such horrific cruelty? Wiesel's autobiography was written after his experience in the concentration camps, so it is possible that his faith did not disappear altogether in his first night, and it was simply stated in that form as a reflection on the horrible memories. He makes it clear in his work, that not all of the men he encountered in the camps lost their faith. Wiesel states: “Some of the men spoke of God: His mysterious ways, the sins of the Jewish people, and the redemption to come. As for me, I had ceased to pray. I concurred with Job! I was not denying His existence, but I doubted His absolute justice” (Wiesel, 45). This statement provides an insight to the effect the Holocaust had on other victims' spiritual lives, rather than just Wiesel's. While Wiesel felt his faith begin to slip away from him, others held strong to their faith, using faith as their means for survival. It is easy to see how holding on to one's faith at a time like the Holocaust would be beneficial. It is not easy to remain optimistic and faithful in desperate situations, however, if one is capable of

doing so, faith can be the most powerful means for survival, bringing hope to a hopeless situation.

Wiesel was not one to use his faith as a means of survival. As his autobiography progresses, it becomes evident how little faith Wiesel has left in his God, the God whom he had worshiped for so many years. After watching a young boy be put to death, many of the men in the camp had their faith shaken. Wiesel writes: Behind me, I heard the same man asking: ‘For God’s sake, where is God?’ And from within me, I heard a voice answer: ‘Where He is? This is where – hanging here from this gallows...’” (Wiesel, 65). This dark line from his text portrays just how dramatic Wiesel’s change in faith had been. During his time in the camp, Wiesel went from a faithful and hopeful boy to a dark and cynical boy. He saw God in a different light - a darker light - and it proved to make a major impact on his spiritual beliefs. He describes this change when he states:

“I no longer pleaded for anything. I was no longer able to lament. On the contrary, I felt very strong. I was the accuser, God the accused. My eyes had opened and I was alone, terribly alone in a world without God, without man...I was nothing but ashes now, but I felt myself to be stronger than this Almighty to whom my life had been bound for so long” (Wiesel, 68).

One argument Wiesel made to support his lack of faith was that in the Old Testament stories describe how God punished those who betrayed Him, and yet in real life Wiesel was observing God punishing people who worshiped him, and continued to do so even as they were tortured and sacrificed. Wiesel argues: “When Sodom lost Your favor, You caused the heavens to rain down fire and damnation. But look at these men whom You have betrayed, allowing them to be tortured, slaughtered, gassed, and burned, what do they do? They pray before You! They praise Your name” (Wiesel, 68). His argument, in my opinion, is strong. He spent years studying his religion, and is well aware of how God punished those who betrayed Him. He spent years believing this was the true God, a power who would love those who love him, and curse those

who cursed him; however, in real life experience Wiesel begins to see God punishing those who worship Him and pray to Him. It is only natural that this observation would lead to a complete lack of faith in God. Wiesel continues to speak of his loss of faith later in the novel when he describes the celebration of Jewish holy days while in the camps. He says: "There was no longer any reason for me to fast. I no longer accepted God's silence. As I swallowed my ration of soup, I turned that act into a symbol of rebellion, of protest against Him" (Wiesel, 69). This is a major turning point for Wiesel's spiritual life. This scene marks the moment when Wiesel not only loses all faith in God, but also seeks to rebel against God, as a statement against the horror God allowed in the world.

The Holocaust may have come to an end in a literal sense; however, for the victims, the terror it brought lived on forever. Helen Fremont is the daughter of Jewish parents who survived the Holocaust and then immigrated to America to begin new lives as Catholics, leaving the past in the past, and hoping to forget it completely. Helen's parents were terrified that some day, another attack against Jewish people would occur, and because of this fear they made the decision to never share their Jewish past with their children, or anyone they met later in life. Once Helen's mother had Helen and her sister, she made a deal with God in hopes of protecting her children. The Holocaust was ever-present in Helen's mother's mind. She felt that she had to bargain with God, and that she had to be Catholic in order to keep her children safe from ever experiencing the trauma she faced as a teenager during the Holocaust. Helen explains: "...my mother and God would bargain a little, and she would extract from Him a promise of our well-being in exchange for her vow to go to Catholic church each week" (Fremont, 10). This change in faith after the Holocaust is different from that of Wiesel's. Helen's mother did not lose faith in God completely. She continued to believe there was God there to protect her and her children;

however, her Orthodox Jewish faith slowly turned into a desperate plea for any God to keep her and her family safe. It is clear that Helen's mother loses her religious identity and no longer sees religious boundaries after the Holocaust. The Holocaust made her more conscious of toleration for all religions. Helen quotes her mother to say: "What difference does it make whether you're Jewish or Catholic or Protestant or Buddhist?!" she screamed. 'Who cares?!'...'I brought you up to be tolerant, not to size everyone up by their religion'" (Fremont, 23). Although Helen's parents gave up their faith, many other victims held true to their beliefs. The Holocaust served these victims as a reason to be proud of their resilience and their faith that helped them to survive. When Helen speaks with friends of her parents, she learns not only that her family was Orthodox, but also that other victims were not so quick to denounce their beliefs. She quotes:

"They knew your mother's parents; they were from the same neighborhood. And my friends told me, "But they're Orthodox!" ...But,' Dr. Janiczek continued, 'I told my friends, "No, the Bocards are Catholic." And my friends were outraged that your parents were pretending not to be Jewish...' (Fremont, 33).

This statement is so important because it shows just how significant and just how different an impact the Holocaust had on different victims. While some victims picked up where they left off, proud to be Jewish and proud to have survived such dark times, Helen's parents lived in constant fear and denial of their past roots. It is interesting to study which approach to life after the Holocaust would be most beneficial for the victims' peace of mind. Helen's father tells her that her mother and aunt completely turned their backs on their faith and on their family in order to come out alive. In my opinion, it would be difficult to resume practicing a faith that led to the slaughter of her parents. Helen's mother and Aunt Zosia had to hide their Jewish past for so long that it became nearly impossible to return to it.

The effect of the Holocaust on spiritual lives did not limit itself to victims, but instead affected children of victims as well. Helen and her sister Lara are examples of how the effects of

the Holocaust had significance for a future generation. As a child Helen was taught by her mother to practice Catholic traditions. She describes: “She would teach me the sign of the cross in six languages...what I didn’t understand was that my mother was equipping me with the means of survival: proof of my Catholicism to anyone in a dozen countries” (Fremont, 9). This description is powerful in that Helen addresses that her mother truly believed this was necessary knowledge to survive in the world. Her mother had engraved in her mind that Jewish people would be persecuted, and therefore it was not safe to raise her children as Jewish. She taught her daughters Catholic practices in hopes that it would save them from the fate she faced as a young adult. Helen remembers a time when she went to her friend Rachel’s house for the weekend. Rachel’s mother was a Holocaust survivor, and openly Jewish. Helen recalls feeling at home in their house, finding many similarities between Rachel’s parents’ habits and her own parents. Helen finds comfort in this, and when she finally discovers her parents are Jewish, she writes: “I had to admit, I wanted to be Jewish – if for no other reason than because it simply made sense” (Fremont, 28). To Helen, all of the signs as a child pointed to her being Jewish, and to finally uncover the secret helped to make sense of her past. This realization led to a change in faith for Helen and her sister. The two made an effort to learn more about the Jewish faith, and attempt to practice Jewish traditions. Helen describes: “In our separate cities Lara and I started going to synagogue on Saturdays... We felt left out of a world” (Fremont, 31). After living nearly thirty years as “Catholics,” Helen and her sister attempt to integrate themselves into their true history. However, this is not an easy task for any religion, and it is truly incredible that they made an attempt and cared enough to try to live out their true identities.

Helen and her sister grew up in the sixties. At this point it had been nearly twenty years since the Holocaust had ended, and yet her parents continued to live in fear. Once the sisters

became aware of their hidden past and spoke with friends of their parents and survivors, they learned that many people were still practicing their Jewish faith proudly. In an interview with Elie Wiesel written by Robert Franciosi, it states: “The late sixties and early seventies was also a period of renewed Jewish consciousness, particularly for young people...” (Franciosi, 299).

Helen fit the criteria perfectly. She became aware of her Jewish faith and wanted to renew it for not only herself, but her parents as well. Although her parents were not fond of the idea, and wanted to continue to live the lives they created for themselves after the war, Helen felt it prudent to write her autobiography exposing their secrets. In a journal written by Maurice Friedman, Holocaust survivors are depicted similar to Helen’s parents; feeling as if they need to bear witness, and yet feeling they should remain silent. He writes: “Holocaust literature strives to express a recognizable shift in being and consciousness...yet only as an untellable tale whose narrators stand under the tension between the duty to bear witness and the urge to remain silent...” (Friedman, 143). Similar to Wiesel’s recommendations, Robert Franciosi addresses that it is not easy for survivors to open up about the past. He writes: “When you were in Germany you recalled the Holocaust and said that ‘only those who were there will know what it meant. The paradox is we cannot tell the story, yet it must be told’” (Franciosi, 295). This urge to remain silent, at least for Helen’s parents, stems from fear. Her parents lived in constant terror for years, learning that their faith was wrong and punishable by death. Naturally, this leads her parents to desire to keep the past hidden, pretending their Jewish faith never existed.

In the interview with Wiesel, it is clear that Wiesel believes survivors do need to open up and share their accounts of the terror they faced; however, it did not stop there. He also believed it was the duty of children of victims to do the same, sharing whatever they knew with the world, so that society could finally know, at least to a certain extent, the horror that occurred in Europe

for all of those years. Wiesel explains: “What I tried to do in the beginning was to move the survivors to open up, to bear witness, to wager on memory, to wager on renewed ties. Then it was for the children of the survivors to do the same” (Franciosi, 292). Although Helen’s parents were not willing to open up and share their experience of the dark times they lived through, Helen was willing, and made sure to do so. Helen, a child of victims, did not know the whole story, her parents’ versions scarce and spotty, nor did she have any first hand experience. Regardless, Helen took the information she was able to gather over many years of research and write the story of her parents’ experience as best she could, following Wiesel’s recommendations. A review written critiquing Helen’s autobiography states: “But Fremont manages to do more than tell a tale of the Holocaust’s horrors and their effect on generations of a family...She challenges us to think about which secrets are worth unraveling...” (Kushner, 174-75). Helen’s autobiography went against her parents’ wishes. What this did to her family is unknown to the general public, but one cannot imagine her parents, who managed to keep their past a secret for nearly sixty years, would be too pleased with her choice to unravel their secrets. Whether it was worth it or not for Helen to expose her family’s secrets may be disputed among others, similar to the disagreement in its need to be uncovered by Wiesel and Kushner. Regardless, Helen wrote the story of her family, and managed to communicate what many would say was an incommunicable experience. One writer, Albert Friedlander, is quoted to say: “...We talked about the Holocaust. Some had the direct experience- and spoke very little” (Friedlander, 7). With this quote in mind, perhaps Helen’s autobiography was necessary. It is possible that many survivors find the experience too painful to talk about, and therefore as a society, people rely on others to share the stories of victims so that the world may know and learn from the horrible mistakes of the past.

The Holocaust had a significant effect on the spiritual lives of victims and their families. However, it was not only peoples' religious beliefs and faith that were altered from the traumatic events. Instead, secular lives were changed forever as well, turning victims into people they never imagined they would be, and forcing them to live the rest of their lives in shattered pieces. Wiesel is a powerful example of the change a person in concentration camps undergoes. Early in their stay in the camps, Wiesel explains how people no longer thought about those who were absent. He describes: "The absent no longer entered our thoughts...their fate was not on our minds. We were incapable of thinking. Our senses were numbed, everything was fading into a fog. We no longer clung to anything" (Wiesel, 36). In a way, just a short time in the concentration camps turned these victims into more selfish beings. They were numbed to sadness and distress, and only could think of themselves and their own survival. It became a sort of 'every-man-for-himself' society. Wiesel recognizes this change in his own self right away. He realizes he is no longer the cheerful eager boy he used to be, faithful and devoted to his Jewish God. He writes: "I too had become a different person. The student of the Talmud, the child I was, had been consumed by the flames. All that was left was a shape that resembled me. My soul had been invaded-and devoured- by a black flame" (Wiesel, 37). One can only imagine the impact the Holocaust had on victims, and one can only pretend to understand the inevitable transformation one experiences in the camps. Wiesel offers a portrayal of how quickly this transformation to a lifeless person becomes. He describes himself as a zombie, alive and present, but soulless and in a constant daze, feeling little to no emotion.

Upon entering the camp, Wiesel and his father stood by each other, determined to stay together through it all. Their bond, loyalty, and affection towards one another is clear from the start of the text. This strong relationship serves as concrete evidence of the effects the Holocaust

had on its victims, turning them into people they never imagined. This is first portrayed when Wiesel's father asks a guard to go to the bathroom in the camp, suddenly struck by an upset stomach. The guard responds by hitting his father. Wiesel describes the situation when he writes: "What happened to me? My father had just been struck, in front of me, and I had not even blinked. I had watched and kept silent. Only yesterday, I would have dug my nails into this criminal's flesh" (Wiesel, 39). In just one short day in a camp, Wiesel began his transformation. Some may consider this transformation to be smart, and a survival technique, while others may consider it selfish and cruel. Regardless of the opinions of others, many victims underwent this transformation from a loving son, to a boy trying to escape the burden of worrying about anyone beside himself. This transformation is evident throughout the entirety of the autobiography. Towards the end, Wiesel describes another moment when he felt himself abandoning his father in a time he normally would have stood by his side. Wiesel writes:

"During the alert, I had followed the mob, not taking care of him. I knew he was running out of strength, close to death, and yet I had abandoned him... I went to look for him. Yet at the same time a thought crept into my mind: If only I didn't find him! If only I were relieved of this responsibility, I could use all my strength to fight for my own survival, to take care only of myself..." (Wiesel, 106).

This moment is a clear portrayal of the transformation Wiesel underwent in the camp. While he still loves his father at this point in his story, he is also trying his best to survive and he is well aware that his father's feebleness is lowering his own chances for survival. It is especially clear when Wiesel describes his thoughts of not finding his father and how relieving that would be for him. This statement is disturbing because it highlights the impact the concentration camps had on how people thought and acted. A loving son became a monster, willing to abandon his own father so as to relieve himself of the burden of caring for him. He describes the burden of the sacrifices he was forced to make for his father when he says: "I gave him what was left of my soup. But my heart was heavy. I was aware that I was doing it grudgingly" (Wiesel, 107). The

camps put people in horrible situations, forcing one to care only for oneself, and making everyone selfish. While this was inevitable in such destitute living, it is still upsetting to see love transformed into burdens. The final words of Wiesel's autobiography really bring home the central effect the Holocaust had on him and the life he lived. As he describes his father's death he writes: "His last word had been my name. He had called out to me and I had not answered. I did not weep, and it pained me that I could not weep...And deep inside me...I might have found something like: Free at last" (Wiesel, 112). Wiesel ignored his father's call, he did not comfort him in his time of death, nor did he stand by his side through the end. Upon entering the camp, Wiesel's only concern was to remain with his father wherever he went; however, by the end his transformation is clear and complete. Wiesel loved his father, but his father became a burden for his own survival, and because of that, Wiesel found his father's death to be freeing.

Helen Fremont's parents were forced to make a major change in their spiritual lives during and after the Holocaust. This was not the only change her parents underwent as a result of the Holocaust. Besides spiritual changes, Helen's parents' lives transformed secularly as well. Neither of her parents lived happy lives in their years following the Holocaust. While they may have been happy from time to time, it was not the happiness one seeks to achieve. Instead, her parents lived in constant fear and denial. Helen explains: "My father suffered from the realization that his life had been unbearable. My mother, on the other hand, suffered from the illusion that hers was not so bad as it really was" (Fremont, 9). Helen's parents did not only suffer spiritually, but also secularly as a result of the horror they faced as young adults. Her father, after living for so many years in the GULAG Russian concentration camps, feels depressed and miserable by the thought of his past, while her mother lives in denial that her past even exists. Her father's suffering is clear to everyone. When Helen speaks with a man who

knew her father about his past, the man tells her: “Your father will cry when you tell him...But what does it matter? He has been crying inside all these years” (Fremont, 35). It is hard to imagine someone ever being the same after suffering such a traumatic experience, and Helen’s father portrays just how difficult a task it is. Her father had the light of his life drained from him during his years in the camp and never quite got it back. He learned in his time in the camp not to trust anyone, and this lesson stuck with him for the rest of his life, making relationships difficult for him to have and hold on to. This dark and lonely way of living left her father depressed and lifeless, and never quite the young fun-loving boy he used to be.

Helen’s mother, also never quite the happy girl she used to be, rather than being visibly upset, lives in denial of her past. She denies the past to anyone who speaks of it, including her daughters, making it so difficult for Helen to learn about her true identity as a Jewish woman. But as a woman explains to Helen, the reason her mother is unable to come to terms with her past is likely because it was such a traumatic experience. Her mother gave up on her family and her faith in those times in order to save herself. While she is not to blame for this, it is a major cause of the post-traumatic stress that she faces, hoping to completely erase the past. In a way, the horrible experience Helen’s parents faced shaped their present outlooks on life. Helen’s mother, frustrated with Helen’s determination to uncover their past exclaims: “What difference does the past make? ...You are who you are today, that’s all that matters! Forget about the past! Look forward! Live for today” (Fremont, 41). This is a wonderful outlook to live by; however, this outlook stems from a dark place in Helen’s mother. Because she wishes to forget the past, she urges everyone to do the same, so that the past becomes irrelevant and she can rest assured that it never comes back to haunt her. Her mother was so desperate to eliminate the past from her life and the lives of people she loved. She took every chance she had to prove she was not a

survivor, that she was not part of the terror at all. This is evident when Helen writes: “I waited for her to finish, but she grew more desperate, her voice quivering. Tears came to her eyes. ‘I’m not a survivor!’ she cried, shaking her arm, pointing to her smooth, unblemished wrist. ‘You see? I have no numbers! I’m not a survivor’” (Fremont, 53). Helen’s mother was desperate in her desire to never have experienced the events she lived through. She was so desperate to forget everything she was set on making sure everyone else saw her as just a woman and not a survivor.

While Helen’s mother wishes she could forget everything, Helen’s aunt, her mother’s sister, actually did forget, but wishes she had more of a memory of it all. Helen quotes her aunt to say: “‘Listen,’ she said gently, ‘after what we went through, you know, your mother and I – I have completely forgotten everything...I have no roots. They are wiped out. I have nothing’” (Fremont, 298). Her aunt would have loved to have some type of memory, to have some type of roots to hold on to. However, she was left with nothing, not even the memory of her own sister’s true name, Batya. The lives of the three adults who actually lived through the Holocaust were all altered in a very dramatic way. As Helen describes:

“My father, white-haired and clear-eyed, with deep lines carved into his face, had learned to live by trusting no one. He would never let his guard down, sacrificing his connection to others for safety. And my mother had survived by dancing from one foot to the other, spinning and twirling her way out of danger...Their secret was their armor, but it was a mask of silence imposed on all of us” (Fremont, 316).

Helen’s parents never resumed normal lives following the Holocaust. Instead, they created new identities for themselves and denied their past. They chose to leave the past in the past, yet the instincts they developed and the emotions they felt during the horror they faced stayed with them for the rest of their lives. Her father continued to live a fairly solitude life, not allowing himself to trust others, and her mother continued to work her way out of danger by denying her past. The two kept their secret hidden as protection, not only for themselves, but also for their

children, unaware that this secret caused more harm than good for their daughter Helen. Helen writes:

“The next few years I was plunged into self-doubt. I seemed to have lost track of the shape of my own life...I agonized over my relationship with my parents and family. My allegiance was to them, and I could not understand how I could carve my own path without disturbing theirs. Years went by, but the story and the secret gnawed at me, refused to let me be” (Fremont, 316).

Helen no longer felt like herself after she attempted to uncover her parents' past. She was only trying to make sense of her own life, but in order to do so she had to untangle a web of secrets that her parents had put together with a purpose. The secret of Helen's parents' past bothered her a great deal, consuming her thoughts and her life. Because her parents were never willing to give her the full and true story of their past, she found herself obsessed with trying to uncover it, and her autobiography served as a way for her to do so the best she could. Helen ends her autobiography by stating that writing it served to loosen the knot that held her family captive for so long, the knot that kept her parents' secrets for so long.

It is made clear by a variety of writers that the Holocaust made a significant impact in the spiritual and secular lives of victims, as well as future generations. Families were torn apart, victims became people they never expected themselves to be, and loss of faith and trust was a common occurrence. It is understandable that such a disturbing and shocking period in history would leave such a mark on society, but to see it so clearly portrayed in autobiographies and interviews is rather chilling. One cannot even begin to try to understand what it would have been like to live through such a terrible period of time, but luckily for society today, many victims are willing to share their stories so that future generations can be aware of history, and be aware that such cruelty does exist, can go unnoticed, and needs to be stopped. Writers today provide future generations with evidence of the horror of the past so that future generations can learn and ensure that something so horrible does not occur again.

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