



Primo Levi

Grade Level: 9-10

Subject: Language Arts / World History / Character Education

Categories: Immigration and Prejudice / History and Society / Italians and the Holocaust

Standards:

NJ Core Content Standards for Social Studies

6.2.12.D.4.i Compare and contrast the actions of individuals as perpetrators, bystanders, and rescuers during events of persecution or genocide, and describe the long-term consequences of genocide for all involved.

Common Core Standards for English Language Arts and History/Social Studies

Reading Standards for Literature – Grades 9-10

Number 4 – Evaluate how an author’s use of language, including formality of diction, shapes meaning and tone in a text (how the language evokes a sense of time and place, how it sets a formal or informal tone).

Number 6 – Analyze a case in which the author’s work takes a position or stance on a social issue or other topic and describe how the author carries out that purpose.

Objectives:

Students will be able to:

1. analyze a poem and determine what the composer was trying to express.
2. interpret the emotions expressed in the poem.

Abstract:

In this lesson students will learn the sad but inspiring story of Primo Levi, a Jewish Italian from Turino. Graduating from the university as a chemist, he found himself caught up in the tide of World War II, eventually fighting in the resistance against the Nazis, being captured and becoming a prisoner at Auschwitz. After undergoing some horrendous experiences, he managed to survive until the end of the war. This experience clearly changed his life and after the war he devoted his time to writing about his experiences and what they meant in the general scheme of things. His work was widely read and he went on to be a significant novelist. Sadly, his success did not erase the demons he had to face. He committed suicide in 1987.

In this lesson, students will explore the work and life of Primo Levi through his history and also through an in-depth analysis of one of his poems.



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Key Terms:

Concentration Camps	Labor and Death camps organized by the Nazi to concentrate slave labor and those destined for systematic execution.
Gentile	A non-Jew
Holocaust	The attempted extermination of the Jewish population and other "undesirables" in Europe by the German Nazis.
Nazi	The National Socialist German Workers' Party in Germany under the leadership of Adolf Hitler. They ruled Germany from 1933 to 1945.

Background:

Like many Jewish Italians of the early 20th Century, Primo Levi had almost thoroughly assimilated into Italian society. Primo came from a liberal Jewish family in Turin and had studied the classics in a notoriously anti-Fascist school that had been run by a large number of socialists and communist instructors. He then entered the University of Turin to study chemistry, but due to Italy's new anti-Jewish laws of 1938, Levi had great difficulty finding a supervisor. Remarkably, he was able to complete his thesis on physics and graduated in 1941.

When Italian partisans overthrew the Mussolini regime in 1943, Levi joined an anti-Fascist partisan group in the Alps to fight against Mussolini's Fascists followers and the Nazi Germans. Untrained for such adventure, Levi and his comrades were quickly captured by an Italian Fascist militia in December 1943. Once the Fascists found out Levi was Jewish, he was interned in a concentration camp in Fòssoli, Italy. Two months later the Fascists sent him to the infamous Nazi death camp at Auschwitz. Only fifteen men and nine women out of 650 Jewish prisoners survived the horrific train ride from Italy.

At Auschwitz Levi worked as chemist making synthetic rubber for the German Army. His earlier training as a chemist had spared him an almost certain death in the Nazi gas chambers. Levi was able to survive by supplementing his meager rations by eating cotton. Eventually, he was liberated from Auschwitz by the Soviet Army and returned home to Turin.

Once back in Turin, Levi decided to record his memories of Auschwitz. Unfortunately, his work, at first, did not sell well on the Italian market. While at Auschwitz, Levi had taught his friend, Jean Samuel, Italian by quoting Dante's *Inferno*. From the Ulysses story he contemplated on a passage which dealt with the crucial question "What is a man?" Subsequently, he named these concentration camp memoirs, "*Se questo è un uomo*" (*If This Is a Man*). He then wrote *La Tregua* (The Truce) that was translated in the United States as "Survival in Auschwitz". Once his books were translated into other languages, Levi became a major literary figure and *La Tregua* soon became a standard text in Italian literature classes.



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Following a career as a chemist and a general manager of a paint company, in 1977 Levi turned to his first love, writing, and produced a number of brilliant novels. After an extremely successful career, in an apparent suicide, Levi died in 1987.

Procedures:

- I. Give student a brief background of Primo Levi's life or have them read: <https://www.biography.com/scientist/primo-levi>
- II. Read Primo Levy's *Schema* (Handout 1)

You who live safe
In your warm houses,
You who find, returning in the evening,

Hot food and friendly faces:
Consider if this is a man
Who works in the mud
Who does not know peace
Who fights for a scrap of bread
Who dies because of a yes or a no.

Consider if this is a woman,
Without hair and without name
With no more strength to remember,
Her eyes empty and her womb cold
Like a frog in winter.

Meditate that this came about:
I commend these words to you.
Carve them in your hearts
At home, in the street,
Going to bed, rising;

Repeat them to your children,
Or may your house fall apart,
May illness impede you,
May your children turn their faces from you.

- III. After reading the entire poem, ask students to look at each verse individually.



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- IV. Have students complete the questions (Handout 2) regarding the Poem.
- a. **Schemà**
- i. You who live safe - *Who is Levi addressing?*
 - ii. In your warm houses - *What does he mean by this verse?*
 - iii. You who find, returning in the evening, Hot food and friendly faces: - *It seems Levi is somewhat cynical here. Why do you think he has this attitude?*
 - iv. Consider if this is a man - *What does Levi say here? What does he imply?*
 - v. Who works in the mud, Who does not know peace, Who fights for a scrap of bread, Who dies because of a yes or a no. - *Explain what Levi is trying to describe in the four verses above, especially in the fourth verse.*
 - vi. Consider if this is a woman - *What does Levi say here? What does he imply?*
 - vii. Without hair and without name, With no more strength to remember, Her eyes empty and her womb cold, Like a frog in winter - *Explain what Levi is trying to describe in the four verses above, especially in the fourth verse.*
 - viii. Meditate that this came about: I commend these words to you. Carve them in your hearts At home, in the street, Going to bed, rising - *Why is Levi issuing these commands? Who is he speaking to? What does this say about his vision of the future? What does that say about his past?*
 - ix. Repeat them to your children, Or may your house fall apart, May illness impede you, May your children turn their faces from you - *Why does Levi issue this curse on those who don't listen? Why the urgency?*

Homework:

After reading the poem and answering the questions, students will write three paragraphs

- #1 Explain why Levi would question the very humanity of the oppressed Jews in the concentration camps. Did the Nazis rob the Holocaust victims of their very manhood and womanhood?
- #2 By what authority does Levi write such a poem?
- #3 Have students write a paragraph explaining whether Levi's warning has been heeded by modern generations.

Assessment:

1. Students will submit questions on Handout sheet.
2. Students' understanding will be evaluated based on the paragraphs written for homework.



SCHEMA

Primo Levi

You who live safe
In your warm houses,
You who find, returning in the evening,

Hot food and friendly faces:
Consider if this is a man
Who works in the mud
Who does not know peace
Who fights for a scrap of bread
Who dies because of a yes or a no.

Consider if this is a woman,
Without hair and without name
With no more strength to remember,
Her eyes empty and her womb cold
Like a frog in winter.

Meditate that this came about:
I commend these words to you.
Carve them in your hearts
At home, in the street,
Going to bed, rising;

Repeat them to your children,
Or may your house fall apart,
May illness impede you,
May your children turn their faces from you.



Name _____ Date _____

SCHEMA

Primo Levi

You who live safe

1. Who is Levi addressing?

In your warm houses,

2. What does he mean by this verse?

You who find, returning in the evening,

Hot food and friendly faces:

3. It seems Levi is somewhat cynical here. Why do you think he has this attitude?

Consider if this is a man

4. What does Levi say here? What does he imply?



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*Who works in the mud
Who does not know peace
Who fights for a scrap of bread
Who dies because of a yes or a no.*

5. Explain what Levi is trying to describe in the four verses above, especially in the fourth verse.

Consider if this is a woman,

6. What does Levi say here? What does he imply?

*Without hair and without name
With no more strength to remember,
Her eyes empty and her womb cold
Like a frog in winter.*

7. Explain what Levi is trying to describe in the four verses above, especially in the fourth verse.

*Meditate that this came about:
I commend these words to you.
Carve them in your hearts
At home, in the street,
Going to bed, rising;*

8. Why is Levi issuing these commands? Who is he speaking to? What does this say about his vision of the future? What does that say about his past?

Repeat them to your children,



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*Or may your house fall apart,
May illness impede you,
May your children turn their faces from you.*

9. Why does Levi issue this curse on those who don't listen? Why the urgency?

- Primo Levi