

Incorporating an Artifact into a History Lesson

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Subject, Grade Level, Time Required: 11th grade Jewish history, history, humanities, English; double period or two 40-minute class periods.

Objective: The 11th grade students will grasp/identify with the feelings of the survivors of the Holocaust after liberation by analyzing an artifact as a symbol of a survivor and by comparing two stories that revolve around that artifact, a watch.

Rationale: I believe that one of the most effective ways to use artifacts in teaching about the Holocaust is by presenting them as a symbol of a human life. By showing students a real, tangible object—in this case, a watch—or even a picture of a real object, a teacher can help them to personalize the Holocaust and thus relate to it in a more concrete/ tangible way. Focusing on a meaningful object causes one to focus on the person to whom it belongs, to study his story, and empathize with his pain. The number of victims who perished in the Holocaust is too vast for anyone to grasp; therefore, as educators, we need to narrow it down in order to transmit the history effectively to our students.

I was exposed to an artifact in this way when I visited the death camps in Poland. A classmate told her grandfather's story regarding a gold watch. It was a unique way of learning about the Holocaust, which I found extremely meaningful. I therefore decided to share it in this way with my students.

Materials: Gold watch, introductory story, copies of the story "The Watch" by Elie Wiesel from the 2008 text *The Call of Memory: Learning About the Holocaust Through Narrative: An*

Anthology (K. Shawn & K. Goldfrad, Eds., New Jersey: Ben Yehuda Press) question sheets, blank sheets of paper and pencils or markers.

Hook: The lesson begins with the teacher role-playing or depicting a particular scene that took place at the time of the liberation from Auschwitz in 1945 (This is a true story that was told to me by a fellow classmate about her grandfather).

Two friends walk slowly and painfully away from the camp, holding on to each other for support. Suddenly one of the men turns to his friend and says: “Yankel, do you see that thing glistening in the sun on the side of the road?” The two men hobble over to the object and Yankel begins digging in the sand to uncover the object. “I can’t really make out what it is....it’s covered in dirt...wow, look, Shmuel, it’s a watch, a gold watch!” [The teacher at this point should take out an actual watch]. Shmuel takes hold of the watch and examines it closely. “It’s broken, and it’s damaged,” he says. “Look, it’s covered in dirt. We have no use for this watch. Perhaps years ago it was valuable, but now it is just like an empty vessel with no purpose. We should just leave it here where we found it.” Yankel stops and thinks for a while and then says, “All this watch needs is a little cleaning and shining. It could use a new battery and new clasp, but otherwise it is as good as new! Of course it has a purpose! It just needs a little fixing up but its value is still the same. It is a still a gold watch.”

Tell students that this is a true story that was told first-hand by a survivor of Auschwitz to his granddaughter.

Content: Students will be asked to respond to the story.

Can they distinguish the deeper meaning of the story? For what is the watch a metaphor? What is significant about a watch?

Yankel was referring to himself and the others, the survivors of the death camps. They were also “dirty” and “broken” but, of course, still had great value and purpose. With some polishing and cleaning, they could still “work” again, just like the watch.

It is significant to note the difference in the responses of the two men. Shmuel viewed their lives post-Holocaust as over, with no purpose. Yankel, on the other hand, did not give up hope. He still had optimism and faith that they would be able to rebuild despite the destruction.

Students will then be given a copy of Elie Wiesel’s story “The Watch” and will be asked to read it in pairs and answer the following four questions:

1. What do you think the watch represented for Elie?
2. Why do you think Elie left the watch behind?
3. Why did he feel like a thief for taking it back?
4. How does this true story of a gold watch compare to the one of Yankel and Shmuel? Is this watch also symbolic of Elie and how he felt about himself after the war?

Possible answers:

1. - His youth
 - His pride
 - Life before the war, his past
 - Happy times/ his Bar mitzvah
 - Wealth, plenty
2. - He felt undeserving of goodness, perhaps after watching so many people perish.
 - He felt he could never go back to the past, to the way things were before the war.
3. - He felt he was a different person and, therefore, the watch no longer belonged to him.

4. -Perhaps, like Shmuel in the first story, Elie believed the watch could not be repaired. Like his own psychic damage, the damage on the watch was too great to fix to be able to start working again.

- Yes. “In its way, it, too, is a survivor...”

- Elie finds comfort in identifying his “brokenness” with that of his watch, just like Yankel and Shmuel did.

- Elie possibly views himself as too broken to carry on, and therefore leaves the watch behind instead of trying to fix it.

Assessment/closure: To conclude the lesson, ask students to draw a picture, using pencil or markers, of what they imagine the two watches from the two stories might have looked like.

The purpose of this assessment is to ascertain each student’s perspective of the responses of survivors at the end of the war, based on the stories discussed in class. It should be clear now that the watch symbolizes the survivors and, therefore, drawing a picture of the objects depicts the outlook of the characters in the two stories.

Each student will, of course, draw a different picture. You may ask them to hang them around the room when they finish and then have students view the results; they should also have the time to explain why they portrayed each watch as they did. There is no right or wrong answer!