Holocaust Writings:
How Does the Spirit Triumph?

Overview: During the Holocaust, six million Jews were sent to their deaths. Nevertheless, in Holocaust literature, one can find glimpses of joy. In this Mini-Q, you will read works of both fiction and nonfiction—some written by the victims themselves. What was it that enabled these men, women, and children to keep their spirits alive?

Documents:
- Document A: “Love”
- Document B: “The Pear”
- Document C: “A Snowman”
- Document D: “Comfort for every sorrow”
- Document E: Gulls and A Rainbow

A Mini Document Based Question (Mini-Q)
Hook Exercise: Children’s Art from Terezin Concentration Camp

Directions: The painting below was created at the Terezin Concentration Camp in the former Czechoslovakia. The artist was Ruth Cechova. Ruth was brought to Terezin at the age of 11 and died at Auschwitz at the age of 13. Look closely at the painting with a partner or in a small group, and then discuss the two questions below.


Discussion Questions:

1. Describe this painting. What is being depicted here?

2. What do you see in this artwork that shows how the human spirit triumphs?
Background Essay

Holocaust Writings: How Does the Spirit Triumph?

The year was 1939. Europe teetered on the edge of hell. Syvia Perlmutter was a four-year-old girl living with her parents and older sister in Lodz, Poland, and excited about starting kindergarten. Anne Frank was a 10-year-old living in Amsterdam, annoying her teachers with her “chatterbox” tendencies. Etty Hillesum was a bright and vibrant young woman in her 20s, also living in Amsterdam. What binds these three together? They were all Jewish, and they all lived in countries soon to be occupied by Nazi Germany.

Adolf Hitler had come to power in Germany in 1933. Hitler and his Nazi party methodically set out to create a greater German Empire led by a pure “master” race. Jews and other “undesirable” people had no place in Hitler’s vision. Early in the war, Jews were rounded up, stripped of rights and property, and forced to live in ghettos. Later, Jews faced a far worse fate.

Nearly 2,700,000 Jews were sent to extermination camps, such as Treblinka and Chelmno, where they were immediately killed. Millions of others were sent to concentration camps, such as Dachau and Auschwitz, where they were either killed, or used as slave labor. The life expectancy of a Jew working in Auschwitz was only a few months, and the vast majority of prisoners who escaped the gas chambers and shooting squads died of starvation, exhaustion, or disease. By the end of the war, six million Jewish men, women, and children had perished. This is known as the Holocaust.

In a 1943 letter to a friend, Etty Hillesum wrote, “A human being is a remarkable thing.” At that moment, Etty knew she would soon be put to death. And in fact, less than five months later, Etty Hillesum died at Auschwitz.

Still, Etty remained remarkably positive during the many months she spent in the Nazi transit camp of Westerbork, waiting for transport to her death. She writes: “How is it that this stretch of heathland surrounded by barbed wire, through which so much human misery has flooded, nevertheless remains inscribed in my memory as something almost lovely? How is it that my spirit, far from being oppressed, seemed to grow lighter and brighter there?” According to Etty, “The few big things that matter in life are what we have to keep in mind. . . . And you can find those few big things anywhere. . . .”

Etty Hillesum, Anne Frank, and Syvia Perlmutter were among those remarkable Holocaust victims and survivors who managed to keep their spirits alive in spite of the horror all around them. How did they do this? What were the “few big things” that Etty and others clung to? This is the focus of our Mini-Q. Read through the documents that follow, and answer the question: Holocaust writings: How does the spirit triumph?
Background Essay Questions

1. What do Syvia Perlmutter, Anne Frank, and Etty Hillesum have in common?

2. Who was the leader of the Nazi party in Germany?

3. Name two concentration camps where Jews were imprisoned during World War II.

4. What was the life expectancy of a Jew working in Auschwitz? What were some of the causes of death in the concentration camps?

5. How many Jews were killed in the Holocaust?

6. Define these terms:

   Nazi:

   ghettos:

   extermination camps:

   concentration camps:

   Auschwitz:

   Holocaust:

✓ Write a two- or three-sentence summary of the Background Essay describing time, place, and story.

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1918 — World War I ends with Germany’s defeat
1933 — Adolf Hitler appointed Chancellor of Germany
1936 — African-American track star Jesse Owens wins four Olympic gold medals in Berlin
1939 — Germany invades Poland, starting World War II
1945 — Russian troops liberate Auschwitz; World War II ends
Understanding the Question and Pre-Bucketing

Understanding the Question

1. What is the analytical question asked by this Mini-Q?

2. Are there any terms in the question that need to be defined?

3. Rewrite the question in your own words.

Pre-Bucketing

Directions: Using any clues from the Mini-Q question and the Background Essay, think of possible analytical categories and label the buckets.
Document A: “Love”


Note: Yellow Star is based on the true story of Jennifer Roy’s aunt, Syvia. After the Nazis invaded Poland in 1939, 164,000 Jews—including Syvia, her parents, and her sister Dora—were forced to live in a ghetto, a small, cramped section of the city of Lodz. Roy tells Syvia’s story through a series of poems. This part of her story takes place in the fall of 1941.

Dora came home from work in a bad mood.
Mother and Papa are tired.
I miss my real doll.
And we are all hungry.
But there is not enough food for dinner.
Mother does not eat her meal.
She gives it to me instead.
She does not say “I love you” in hugs or kisses,
but her love fills my plate,
and I gobble it up.

Papa says Mother is a noble woman.
He tells me,
“From pain your mother gave you life,
through pain she continues to give.”
I think about Papa’s words as I finish my broth.
It hurt Mama to give me life? Why?
Didn’t I just pop out of her belly button?
I guess I think these words out loud, because
suddenly everyone is looking at me.
Then they all burst into laughter.
Papa, Dora, even Mother.

“Syvia, you are a tonic
for helping us forget our pain,”
says Papa,
and they all smile at me.
Their love fills the air around me,
and I gulp it down.

Document Analysis

1. Where and when does this family scene take place?

2. Why do you think Roy has chosen to tell her aunt’s story through verse, or poetry? Explain.

3. Why doesn’t Syvia’s mother eat her meal?

4. What does Syvia say to make her family “burst into laughter”?

5. Etty Hillesum wrote that in order for the spirit to survive the Holocaust, “the few big things that matter in life are what we have to keep in mind” (BGE). What “big thing” helps the spirit of Syvia’s family to triumph? Is there evidence of more than one “big thing”? Explain.
Document B: “The Pear”


Note: In January 1942, the Nazis began to send Jews from the Lodz ghetto to concentration camps, such as Chelmno and Auschwitz. The events in “The Pear” took place in the late fall or early winter of 1944. At this time, only about 800 Jews were left in the Lodz ghetto. The Nazis thought they had sent all of the ghetto’s children to their deaths, but 12 children, including Syvia, were still there—in hiding.

What if the Germans come into the yard? I eat some more.
What if they are looking out the window My hand gets a little sticky,
of one of the buildings? but I don’t care.
What if someone sees me? I am out in the sunshine
I am drawn to the tree eating a pear,
like a bee to honey, just like any normal girl
Closer. who isn’t Jewish in Poland,
Closer. on a regular day.
I can touch the tree branches now. Suddenly I realize where I am,
I reach up and grasp the pear. what I am doing.
Its skin is yellow green, I had better get inside.
ripe. I am about to run back,
I twist it a bit, and the pear when I spot another pear on the tree,
pops off its branch a little smaller than my pear,
into my hand. a little greener.
It is solid, smooth,
real. I think of Dora, and I grab it,
There is no stopping now, then turn and run
At this moment there are no Germans, back to the building
no worries. with a pear in each hand.
There is only me and this pear. Through the door,
I take a bite. down the hallway,
Cool, juicy, sweet. down the stairs,
Perfect. into the cellar.
Delicious!

Document Analysis

1. Refer back to Document A. What was the original population of the Lodz ghetto?

2. How many people remained at the end of 1944? How many of these were children?

3. Why is it so dangerous for Syvia to be outside?

4. What details does Syvia use to describe both the pear and the experience of eating it outside?

5. What does Syvia stop to do before running back inside, to the cellar where she is hiding?

6. Using this document as evidence, what “big thing” helps Syvia’s spirit to triumph? Is there evidence of more than one “big thing”? Explain.
Document C: “A Snowman”


Story Note: The Book Thief is a novel about a young girl named Liesel (LEE-zel), who lives with her foster parents, Hans and Rosa Hubermann, in Nazi Germany. In this scene, it is Christmas Eve, 1941, and for over a year, the Hubermanns have been hiding a Jewish man, Max Vandenburg, in their basement.

After delivering the first handfuls of snow, Liesel checked that no one else was outside, then proceeded to take as many buckets and pots out as she could. She filled them with the mounds of snow and ice that blanketed the small strip of world that was Himmel Street. Once they were full, she brought them in and carried them down to the basement.

All things being fair, she first threw a snowball at Max and collected a reply in the stomach. Max even threw one at Hans Hubermann as he made his way down the basement steps.

“Arschloch!” Papa yelped. “Liesel, give me some of that snow. A whole bucket!” For a few minutes, they all forgot. There was no more yelling or calling out, but they could not contain the small snatches of laughter. They were only humans, playing in the snow, in a house.

Papa looked at the snow-filled pots. “What do we do with the rest of it?”

“A snowman,” Liesel replied. “We have to make a snowman.”

… [Mama] came down and helped them. She even brought the buttons for the eyes and nose and some string for a snowman smile.

Even a scarf and hat were provided for what was really only a two-foot man of snow. …

“What do we do when it melts?” Liesel asked. …

“It won’t melt.” [Papa] rubbed his hands and blew into them. “It’s freezing down here.”

Melt it did, though, but somewhere in each of them, that snowman was still upright. It must have been the last thing they saw that Christmas Eve when they finally fell asleep. There was an accordion in their ears, a snowman in their eyes, and for Liesel, there was the thought of Max’s last words before she left him by the fire. …

“Often I wish this would all be over, Liesel, but then somehow you do something like walk down the basement steps with a snowman in your hands.”

Document Analysis

1. Who has been hiding in the Hubermanns’ basement for over a year? Why?

2. What does Liesel carry down to the basement?

3. In the third paragraph, find the line: “For a few minutes, they all forgot.” In this moment, what have Liesel, Papa, and Max forgotten?

4. What helps them to forget?

5. Re-read the last thing Max says to Liesel on Christmas Eve. What do you think he means?

6. Using this document as evidence, what “big thing” helps Max’s spirit to triumph? Is there evidence of more than one “big thing”? Explain.
Document D: “Comfort for every sorrow”

Source: Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl, 1947.

Note: In May of 1940, the Nazis began their five-year occupation of the Netherlands. In July of 1942, 13-year-old Anne—along with her family and four others—moved to a “Secret Annexe” of an office building in Amsterdam where they remained in hiding for two years. In August 1944, they were betrayed and discovered by the Nazis. Anne Frank died at Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in 1945. Kitty is the name Anne gives her diary.

Wednesday, 23 February, 1944

Dear Kitty,

It’s lovely weather outside and I’ve quite perked up since yesterday. Nearly every morning I go to the attic. . . . From my favorite spot on the floor I look up at the blue sky and the bare chestnut tree, on whose branches little raindrops shine, appearing like silver, and at the seagulls and other birds as they glide on the wind.

. . . I looked out of the open window too, over a large area of Amsterdam, over all the roofs and on to the horizon, which was such a pale blue that it was hard to see the dividing line. “As long as this exists,” I thought, “and I may live to see it, this sunshine, the cloudless skies, while this lasts, I cannot be unhappy.”

The best remedy for those who are afraid, lonely, or unhappy is to go outside, somewhere where they can be quite alone with the heavens, nature, and God. Because only then does one feel that all is as it should be and that God wishes to see people happy, amidst the simple beauty of nature. As long as this exists, and it certainly always will, I know that then there will always be comfort for every sorrow, whatever the circumstances may be. And I firmly believe that nature brings solace in all troubles.

Document Analysis

1. Where is Anne as she writes in her diary?

2. How long have Anne and her family been in hiding at the time of this entry?

3. What is Anne describing? Give three details of Anne’s description that stand out to you.

4. According to Anne, what brings “comfort for every sorrow”?

5. How does this document help to answer the Mini-Q question: How does the spirit triumph?
Document E: “Gulls and A Rainbow”


Note: Etty Hillesum wrote the following letters from Westerbork to friends back in Amsterdam. Westerbork was a transit camp where Dutch Jews awaited transport to concentration camps. Jopie was another friend who was at Westerbork with Etty. Etty died at Auschwitz on November 30, 1943.

[To Father Han and others]

Thursday afternoon, [8 July 1943]

... Now and then I join the gulls. In their movements through the great cloudy skies one suspects laws, eternal laws of another order than the laws we humans make. This afternoon Jopie, who feels thoroughly sick and all in, stood together with his sister-in-arms Etty for at least a quarter of an hour looking up at one of these black-and-silver birds as it moved among the massive deep-blue rain clouds. We suddenly felt a lot less oppressed. ...

7 August [1943]

Maria, dear friend,

This morning there was a rainbow over the camp, and the sun shone in the mud puddles. When I went into the hospital barracks, some of the women called out, “Have you got good news? You look so cheerful.” I considered saying something about ... peace being on the way. I couldn’t fob them off with the rainbow, could I?—even though that was the only reason for my cheerfulness. ...

Document Analysis

1. Who wrote these letters?

2. To whom did she write them? From where did she send them?

3. In the first letter, Etty writes that she is her friend Jopie’s “sister-in-arms.” What do you think she means by this?

4. What does “oppressed” mean? What makes Etty and Jopie feel “a lot less oppressed”?

5. In the second letter, what “was the only reason” for Etty’s cheerfulness?

Bucketing—Getting Ready to Write

Bucketing

Look over all the documents and organize them into your final buckets. Write final labels under each bucket and place the letters of the documents in the buckets where they belong. It is okay to put a document in more than one bucket, but you need a good reason to do so. Remember, your buckets are going to become your body paragraphs.

Thesis Development and Road Map

On the chickenfoot below, write your thesis and your road map. Your thesis is always an opinion and answers the Mini-Q question. The road map is created from your bucket labels and lists the topic areas you will examine in order to prove your thesis.
From Thesis to Essay Writing

Mini-Q Essay Outline Guide

Unit Title

Paragraph #1
Grabber

Background (time, place, story)

Restating the question with key terms defined

Thesis and road map

Paragraph #2
Baby Thesis for bucket one

Evidence: Supporting detail or quotation from document with document citation

Argument: Connecting evidence to the thesis

Paragraph #3
Baby Thesis for bucket two

Evidence

Argument

Paragraph #4
Baby Thesis for bucket three

Evidence

Argument

Paragraph #5
Conclusion: Restatement of main idea, along with a fresh insight or wrinkle