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Witnesses of Genocide

Prof. Stanton's "Ten Stages of Genocide" is an academic tool that attempts to explain the stages that occur before genocide. While genocide has occurred several times in history, the word was not coined until 1944 in Polish lawyer Raphaël Lemkin's book *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*. With the help of looking at Prof. Stanton's model, we can look back in history and use the stages to see the other times attempted genocides have occurred. For example, in Elie Wiesel's memoir *Night*, originally published in 1956, readers witness a first-person view of the Holocaust. While reading *Night*, the stages slowly present themselves throughout the book as we see Genocide unfold. Another earlier autobiography is Fredrick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, published in 1845. Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* helps support Prof. Stanton's argument on what could occur before genocide by presenting examples that align with Stanton's stages. As the reader makes their way through Douglass's *Narrative*, Stanton's stages start to present themselves through Douglass's words. By looking at Stanton's work, we are able to see that American slavery, like the Holocaust, was also an attempt at genocide. Placing the work of Frederick Douglass, Elie Wiesel, and Prof. Stanton side by side, the reader can see a clear-cut similarity in all of their works.

Stanton's first stage of **Classification** occurs in both Wiesel's *Night* and Douglass's *Narrative*. Stanton describes classification as a way to "distinguish people into "us and them" by ethnicity, race, religion, or nationality" (Stanton 1). This is seen in *Night* various times. The first occurrence is when Elie Wiesel's community is forced to wear a star on their clothes. This is used to tell the difference between the word the Nazis used "regular people" and Jewish people. By using this, it also tells the Jewish people and citizens that there is an "out-group" and an "in-group" and that the Jewish people fall into the out-group category. Another occurrence is when Wiesel's community is told to wear different clothes while at Auschwitz.

The Jews that were fortunately chosen to work received clothes that look like pajamas with stripes. These clothes were a form of symbolization and also another example of the Nazis showing the Jews that they were less than others. Classification also appears in Douglass's *Narrative*, a prime example is slavery itself. While reading Douglass's *Narrative*, the reader gets a first-person view into the life of a slave and Douglass's journey.

Stanton's third stage, **Discrimination** is present in both books. Stanton's definition of discrimination is "a dominant group uses law, custom, and political power to deny the rights of other groups" (1). This is seen in both texts several different times. In *Narrative*, Douglass gives the reader an example of one of the rules that a slave is supposed to follow. He explains how the dominant group puts laws in place to prevent the out-group from educating themselves.

Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read. To use his own words, further, he said, "If you give a n----- an inch, he will take an ell. A n----- should know nothing but to obey his master--to do as he is told to do. Learning would *spoil* the best n----- in the world. Now" said he, "if you teach that n----- (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. (Douglass 31)

At the beginning of *Night*, the Nazis forced the Jews to wear a yellow star and they were not allowed to leave their houses after six o'clock. In Auschwitz, Wiesel learned the hard way that the most important rule is to never make an SS guard upset, otherwise the unfortunate Jew would be beaten, tortured, or killed. In both books, the laws put in place for the out-group are also a form of dehumanization. The reason why is that the dominant forces in both books deny the out-group their human rights.

Dehumanization is Stanton's fourth stage. His definition of dehumanization is "one group denies the humanity of the other group" (Stanton 1). This is crucial to Genocide. By having this mindset, the perpetrators could feel less guilty about the harm they are causing. For example, in *Night*, Wiesel is amongst a group of Jews who arrive and go through an abundance of stages that automatically made them feel like they were not human but an animal. Before they

arrived at Auschwitz they were placed in cattle cars that were meant for animals. “There are eighty of you in this wagon,’ added the German officer. ‘If anyone is missing, you’ll all be shot, like dogs...” (Wiesel 22). Wiesel described the conditions were unbearable, there was suffocation, intense heat, and little space to sit. After days of being in the cattle cars, the Jews were finally let out, but the torture continued. They arrived at Auschwitz and the first stage was the **selection**. The Nazis decided which Jew lived or died, and if they were selected to die they would go to the crematory which was equivalent to a slaughterhouse for animals.

We continued our march toward the square. In the middle stood the notorious Dr. Mengele (a typical SS officer: a cruel face, but not devoid of intelligence, and wearing a monocle); a conductor’s baton in his hand, he was standing among the other officers. The baton moved unrelentingly, sometimes to the right, sometimes to the left. (29)

After going through selection days passed by of labor. Then Wiesel described having his name taken away from him and becoming a number.

In the afternoon we were made to line up. Three prisoners brought a table and some medical instruments. With the left sleeve rolled, each prisoner passed in front of the table. The three “veterans,” with needles in their hands, engraved a number on our left arms. I became A-7713. After that I had no other name. (39)

At Auschwitz, Wiesel described how they sometimes would receive no water or food for days but still were expected to work, and if they were sick they would push through just to not get killed. The reason why is that if a Jew looked weak at Auschwitz that would result in them being slaughtered like an animal. At the end of *Night*, Wiesel looks at himself and described that he could no longer recognize himself anymore. This shows that while being at Auschwitz the perpetrators stripped away his identity.

Three days after the liberation of Buchenwald I became very ill with food poisoning. I was transferred to the hospital and spent two weeks between life and death. One day I was able to get up, after gathering all my strength. I wanted to see myself in the mirror

hanging on the opposite wall. I had not seen myself since the ghetto. From the depths of the mirror, a corpse gazed back at me. The look in his eyes, as they stared into mine, has never left me. (109)

In Douglass's *Narrative*, Douglass describes how slaves did not have an accurate record of their birthdate, which is a form of dehumanization. As a child, Douglass witnessed horrible practices perpetrated by his master. His master took pleasure in whipping his slaves and even when it looked like he was done, he wouldn't stop until his arm hurt. He would whip his slaves like they were animals making sure they never stepped out of line and did exactly what he said. In the memoir, the slaves are referred to as n**** and not by their name, instead of calling them by the name given to them they are referred to by another derogatory term. "A n----- should know nothing but to obey his master--to do as he is told to do" (Douglass 31). The perpetrators deny the slaves their basic human's rights by not calling them by their names.

While reading these two memoirs, the reader is able to witness clear evidence that Stanton's stages were accurate. There are multiple examples that align with Stanton's stages. As we look back at the past, we hope that what happened should never occur again. With the help of Stanton's stages and many other works that were published, we as a society can make sure that an attempt at genocide should never occur again.