Organizational Patterns

This book is divided into two parts. Part One is called “Experiences in a Concentration Camp” and Part Two is called “Logotherapy in a Nutshell”. In 1984 a postscript was added entitled “The Case for a Tragic Optimism”. The two main sections are not divided into chapters, but do contain breaks between groups of paragraphs. The first section focuses on Frankl’s experiences in various concentration camps, but the story is not chronological. His organization revolves around the three psychological phases of a concentration camp prisoner, so the story is episodic with various vignettes that jump around in time. The second section is a more technical description of his psychological theory, called logotherapy, and contains a mixture of explanation and story examples from patients he has treated. There is a postscript entitled “The case for a Tragic Optimism.”

Issues Related to this Study of Literature

Themes:
This book really has one central theme: Life has meaning. According to Frankl, man must find this meaning in order to survive. The first section really focuses on how only the concentration camp prisoners who felt they had a purpose to their lives, a goal or future to live for, survived. Anyone who lost meaning or purpose, a reason for living, would soon die. Frankl often quoted Nietzsche, who said, “He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how.” He emphasizes that man has the ability to choose what is meaningful in his life.

Sub-themes under this category of meaning are:
- Love gives life meaning. If someone has a close person in their life whom they love, such as a spouse or child, that person often inspires purpose and meaning in their life. They have a will to live for that person.
-Religion gives life meaning. A belief in God as a Divine Taskmaster who has assigned a role or task to individuals can provide strong meaning in a person’s life, a reason to live.
-Suffering gives life meaning. If a person suffers for a reason, for example, a man who suffers after he loses his wife because he loved her so much, than that suffering can provide meaning to a person’s life and help them to see purpose (he is honoring his wife through suffering for her loss).

Another minor theme of the book is psychoanalysis verses logotherapy. This is more developed in the second section. Frankl argues that some neurosis and other problems in peoples lives are not caused by conflicts between drives and instincts, as psychoanalysts will argue, but instead arises from a “frustration of the will to meaning”, which is treated by logotherapy.

Setting:
For most of Part One, the setting is various concentration camps, including Auschwitz, a camp associated with Dachau, and smaller camps that are not named. These settings are obviously bleak as Frankl describes the frigid temperatures, the crowded barracks where men slept so close together they couldn’t lie flat on their backs, and the general filthiness of fleas and lice everywhere. Part Two, being more theoretical in nature, does not contain much of a cohesive setting, except for possibly the hospital where he works.

Point of View
This book is obviously written from first person point of view, but it is not just the point of view of a main character, but the voice of the author himself and the story of a real person who lived through the experiences he describes. This is a significant point for students to understand.

Literary Devices:
Genre- This book is nonfiction, and while it is a story, it mostly falls under the genre of a psychological treatise.
Motivation- This book contains a unique motivation, to explain a scientific psychological theory.
Narration- The narration is told from first hand experiences in an episodic pattern.
Affective Issues Related to the Work

I think any student who has suffered in any way—lost a loved one, experienced some horrible tragedy, or even is just wrapped up in the depressing complexities of being a teenager—can in some way connect to the powerful message of this book about dealing with suffering.

Students of minority groups or any students who have experienced oppression or persecution should be able to relate to the horrific stories of oppression and persecution in this novel, and perhaps find inspiration and meaning beyond the hurt and anger of being treated in such a senseless and ugly way.

Even students with relatively easy lives can find ways to connect with this book. Frankl describes how people who think their main purpose in life is success or money become bored or detached with life and need to find deeper levels of meaning. All teenagers question the meaning of life, challenge the meanings that society or culture defines for them, and search for sense and purpose in their lives. This book offers some powerful reflections on those ideas.

Vocabulary Issues

While the story and the main concepts in this book are certainly attainable for high school students, Frankl is writing to an educated audience and sometimes uses fairly sophisticated vocabulary and technical terms that students may need help with. Some examples are: *logotherapy*, *existentialism*, *crematorium*, *psychiatry*, *gangrenous*, *moribund*, *apathy*, *typhus*, *sanatorium*, *psychological*, *sadistic*, *psychoanalysis*, *retrospective*, *introspective*, *neurotic*, *sublimations*, *noölogical*, *vacillate*, *actualization*, *melancholia*, *endogenous*, *paradoxical*, and *nihilism* just to name a few. Depending on the student’s level, there are plenty of other words the student may need help with. While many of these words can be understood through context clues, Frankl does sometimes assume his reader has background knowledge in his field and doesn’t explain his vocabulary very well. It is also perhaps wise to keep in mind that this is a translation of a work that was originally written in German, and therefore vocabulary may be different than the author’s original intention. (See the vocab strategy for an idea of how to address this problem)
Background Knowledge

World War II and Concentration Camps

Students need to have a basic understanding of what was going on during WWII, more especially what was happening in Germany under Hitler’s regime. Frankl assumes his reader is already familiar with the basic history of the war and the general atrocities of the Nazis. He mentions famous concentration camps, gas chambers, and other activities without much elaboration. He never mentions he is a Jew or brings up the ugly racism inherent in the system. Background knowledge is essential to understand the significance of the whole story and some of the specific things he mentions.

Freud’s Theory of Psychoanalysis

Frankl is writing for an educated audience and assumes his readers are familiar with the basics of psychoanalysis. Students should at least understand the basics of who Sigmund Freud was, what his theories were, and how he influenced psychoanalysis.

Implications for Students of Diversity

Frankl himself was a Jew, a minority that in WWII Germany was persecuted to the point of genocide. Concentration camps are one of the evillest manifestations of racism that the world has ever produced. This book could be used in a discussion about the effects of racism. There are some particularly good sections that could be used such as towards the end of the First Part when Frankl discusses how there were both good and evil men among the Jewish prisoners and the German guards. He says “From all this we may learn that there are two races of men in this world, but only these two—the ‘race’ of the decent man and the ‘race’ of the indecent man. Both are found everywhere; they penetrate into all groups of society.”

Minority students may be able to relate well to the suffering depicted in this book, and students of any race may learn the ugliness of racism.

Gender Issues

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In general, there are not a lot of gender issues in this book. In fact, the fault that may be applied is that women are hardly mentioned at all, and therefore it can be interpreted as a sexist novel. However, the fact that women are rarely mentioned is due more to the fact that the male and female prisoners were segregated, and therefore women were not a part of the experiences Frankl discusses. However, Frankl speaks very highly of his wife, whose memory helped keep him alive throughout his ordeal, and never speaks condescendingly of women at all.

The Central Question or Enduring Issue

The central question of this book is one of the most significant questions in the world: “What is the meaning of life?” Frankl does not choose to answer this question in a one-size-fits-all deductive statement. In fact, he makes the observation that such an attempt would be absurd, that meaning is different for each individual and can only be determined by the individual. However, Frankl does use his experiences in the concentration camps, when humans were literally stripped of everything but their ability to choose their own attitude, to study what the meaning of life is at its most basic, its most extremely naked core, and how important that meaning is to survival. It is an eloquent, extremely moving exploration of the most basic need of humans, even more basic than food or water. It is the need for this life to mean something.

Research Issues/Project Ideas

1. Students could do a research project on the Holocaust finding both secondary sources and other primary sources like Frankl’s account. This could be a good opportunity for students to not only learn about the Holocaust and build background knowledge for the book, but also to evaluate the difference between primary and secondary sources. For instance, they may learn a lot about the number of concentration camps established, the number of people who were killed in various ways, and other such statistics from secondary sources, but Frankl’s first-hand experience is much more descriptive of what the actual prisoner went through emotionally and psychologically every day.

2. Students could also do a research project (preferably a group project) on various psychological theories, starting with Freud, including Frankl’s
logotherapy, and moving through to the present. To keep it more narrow, a teacher could just have the students focus on a comparison between Freud and Frankl. This would not only be helpful in understanding the novel, but Freud’s psychoanalysis is also the basis for a lot of literary analysis, and in fact influenced many twentieth century novelists.

3. This book provides a lot of opportunity for class discussion and personal reflection. I would have students keep a reflection journal as they read through the novel and participate in class discussions. They could write down particularly powerful quotes or stories that impacted them and respond to the ideas that Frankl presents. After they are finished reading the book, students would do a culminating reflection paper where they analyzed what they thought was the meaning of life for them at their most basic, existential level.
Informational/Functional Texts

1. The Origin and Development of Psychoanalysis by Sigmund Freud
2. http://www.ushmm.org/ which is the website for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
3. Wikipedia entries for both the Holocaust, Logotherapy, and Psychoanalysis
4. There is a lot of similar themes and content in novels such as: The Diary of Anne Frank by Anne Frank, The Hiding Place by Corrie ten Boom, The Promise by Chiam Potok (for psychoanalysis), and a plethora of others
5. Other history books and research books on the Holocaust or psychology