



# THE NEW JERSEY ITALIAN HERITAGE COMMISSION



## 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:**

Please read the New Jersey Student Learning Standards on page 9 before conducting the lesson. They will help you give explicit instructions to your students and help you create rubrics most appropriate for your class.

**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.

**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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 Fossoli, 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.

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:  
[www.inch.com/~ari/levi1.html](http://www.inch.com/~ari/levi1.html)

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.

IV. Have students complete the questions (Handout 2) regarding the Poem.

a. **Schema**

- 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?

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*In your warm houses,*

2. What does he mean by this verse?

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*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?

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*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.

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*Consider if this is a woman,*

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

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*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.

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*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?

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*Repeat them to your children,  
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?

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- Primo Levi



## **New Jersey Student Learning Standards Social Studies**

- 6.2.12.A.4.c Analyze the motivations, causes, and consequences of the genocides of Armenians, Roma (gypsies), and Jews, as well as the mass exterminations of Ukrainians and Chinese.
- 6.2.12.A.4.d Assess government responses to incidents of ethnic cleansing and genocide.
- 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.

### **English Language Arts**

RL.9-10.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

RL.9-10.2 Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

RL.9-10.3 Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.

RL.9-10.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).

RL.9-10.5 Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulate time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks) create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.

RL.9-10.6 Analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States, drawing on a wide reading of world literature.

RL.11-12.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

RL.11-12.2 Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.

RL.11-12.3 Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

RL.11-12.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)

RL.11-12.5 Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

RL.11-12.6 Analyze a case in which grasping a point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement).

W.9-10.1 Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

W.9-10.1a Introduce precise claim(s), distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and create an organization that establishes clear relationships among claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.

W.9-10.1b Develop claim(s) and counterclaims fairly, supplying evidence for each while pointing out the strengths and limitations of both in a manner that anticipates the audience’s knowledge level and concerns.

W.9-10.1c Use words, phrases, and clauses to link the major sections of the text, create cohesion, and clarify the relationships between claim(s) and reasons, between reasons and evidence, and between claim(s) and counterclaims.

W.9-10.1d Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing.

W.9-10.1e Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports the argument presented.

W.9-10.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

W.9-10.2a Introduce a topic; organize complex ideas, concepts, and information to make important connections and distinctions; include formatting (e.g., headings), graphics (e.g., figures, tables), and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension.

W.9-10.2b Develop the topic with well-chosen, relevant, and sufficient facts, extended definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples appropriate to the audience's knowledge of the topic.

W.9-10.2c Use appropriate and varied transitions to link the major sections of the text, create cohesion, and clarify the relationships among complex ideas and concepts.

W.9-10.2d Use precise language and domain-specific vocabulary to manage the complexity of the topic.

W.9-10.2e Establish and maintain a formal style and objective tone while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing.

W.9-10.2f Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports the information or explanation presented (e.g., articulating implications or the significance of the topic).

W.9-10.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

W.9-10.3a Engage and orient the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation, establishing one or multiple point(s) of view, and introducing a narrator and/or characters; create a smooth progression of experiences or events.

W.9-10.3b Use narrative techniques, such as dialogue, pacing, description, reflection, and multiple plot lines, to develop experiences, events, and/or characters.

W.9-10.3c Use a variety of techniques to sequence events so that they build on one another to create a coherent whole.

W.9-10.3d Use precise words and phrases, telling details, and sensory language to convey a vivid picture of the experiences, events, setting, and/or characters.

W.9-10.3e Provide a conclusion that follows from and reflects on what is experienced, observed, or resolved over the course of the narrative.

W.9-10.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

W.11-12.1. Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

W.11-12.1a Introduce precise, knowledgeable claim(s), establish the significance of the claim(s), distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and

create an organization that logically sequences claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.

W.11-12.1b. Develop claim(s) and counterclaims avoiding common logical fallacies and using sound reasoning and thoroughly, supplying the most relevant evidence for each while pointing out the strengths and limitations of both in a manner that anticipates the audience's knowledge level, concerns, values, and possible biases.

W.11-12.1c. Use transitions (e.g. words, phrases, clauses) to link the major sections of the text, create cohesion, and clarify the relationships between claim(s) and reasons, between reasons and evidence, and between claim(s) and counterclaims.

W.11-12.1d. Establish and maintain a style and tone appropriate to the audience and purpose (e.g. formal and objective for academic writing) while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing.

W.11-12.1e. Provide a concluding paragraph or section that supports the argument presented (e.g., articulating implications or the significance of the topic).

W.11-12.2. Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

W.11-12.2a A. Introduce a topic; organize complex ideas, concepts, and information so that each new element builds on that which precedes it to create a unified whole; include formatting (e.g., headings), graphics (e.g., figures, tables), and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension.

W.11-12.2b. Develop the topic thoroughly by selecting the most significant and relevant facts, extended definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples appropriate to the audience's knowledge of the topic.

W.11-12.2c. Use appropriate and varied transitions and syntax to link the major sections of the text, create cohesion, and clarify the relationships among complex ideas and concepts.

W.11-12.2d. Use precise language, domain-specific vocabulary, and techniques such as metaphor, simile, and analogy to manage the complexity of the topic.

W.11-12.2e. Establish and maintain a style and tone appropriate to the audience and purpose (e.g. formal and objective for academic writing) while attending to the norms and conventions of the discipline in which they are writing.

W.11-12.2f. Provide a concluding paragraph or section that supports the argument presented (e.g., articulating implications or the significance of the topic).

