

ENGLISH TEXT SUMMARY NOTES
“If This is a Man”

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AREA 1:

READING & THE STUDY OF TEXTS: IF THIS IS A MAN

Chapter 1 GENRE

In the author's preface, Levi makes it clear that his book is not to be read as a comprehensive historical account of the atrocities enacted at Auschwitz, nor is it a judgment of the perpetrators of the crimes against humanity – the book purports to be an individual's reflection on his experience of the camp, and within this reflection, Levi seeks to meditate on how this could happen, and to do this he meditates upon what is a man. So, this is an autobiography and in the realm of the factual, as 'none of the facts are invented'. It can in some way be seen as a posthumous journal, although it clearly does not have the singular purpose of a chronicle. The events are arranged in a literary form in so far as the use of metaphor and narrative techniques have been utilised to provide an authenticity that gets at the heart of this man's experience at Auschwitz. Indeed, history might ask what man did, but Literature asks what man is, and Levi's account attains the complexity of the literary in a way that accentuates the authenticity of what it records. Man only makes sense of what he is from a consideration of what he has done through developing narrative, and the more sophisticated the narrative, the more significance can be gleaned from it.

Most of all, the text is a confessional; a faithful recounting of what happened; an exhortation for nobody to forget the barbarity of Auschwitz; a treatise into the depths of the human spirit and the human psyche.

Chapter 2

STRUCTURE

If this is a Man is not written as a linear narrative, and Levi himself says in his preface that the book has a 'fragmentary character' because the chapters of the book have been written, 'not in logical succession, but in order of urgency' (by urgency, he means the compulsion to tell his story). Even so, there is clearly a chronological order of the text from Levi's initial arrest in December 1943, to the liberation of Auschwitz by the Russians on the 25th January 1945, and there is also a sequencing of the changing seasons as the narrative unfolds.

The account is prefaced by a poem called 'Shema' which includes the text's title 'If this is a Man', and can therefore be seen to act as a frame for what is to follow. The central line in the poem is 'Meditate that this came about', and this of course is the key to reading the account of Auschwitz that follows – everything must be meditated upon with the question 'how this came about' being in the foreground.

The text is comprised of seventeen chapters, each chapter given its own title that explores a distinct aspect of life in the camp that is to be the focus for meditation. Chapter 1 explores the arrest and deportation to Auschwitz and Chapter 2 follows with a reflection on his despondent state of mind as the harsh reality of what has befallen him sinks in, and Chapter 3 and 4 continues with Levi's familiarising himself with the bleak environment of his surroundings. Through a descriptive collage of experiences, Chapters 5 and 6 capture the essence of the nights spent at Auschwitz and the work executed in the day. Chapter 7 is a counterpoint to Chapter 2 as a record of glimmering hope that was necessary for survival, and the inclusion of this chapter provides a necessary balance that maintains the accounts authenticity. Chapters 8 and 9 explore the kind of moral relativism many prisoners had to practice to survive, and Chapter 9 explores the characteristics that enabled or disabled them in the quest for survival. The other chapters continue to form a series of meditations on different aspects of camp life, with the possible exception of Chapter 17, which reads as a day by day journal of the days between the German abandonment of Auschwitz until the day of its liberation by the Russians. The increased fragmentation of the narrative in Chapter 17 can also be seen to reflect the disintegration of the Lager system itself.

One chapter that appears to slightly stand outside the convention of the others is Chapter 11 which features Levi's attempt to reconstruct the memory of the passage from Dante's *The Divine Comedy* which symbolises Levi's reawakened sense of questioning the reason for man's existence and reflects on the importance of human communication and communion between human beings which is the source of the human impulse to read and create Literature. This chapter also explicitly provides the reader with another way of observing Levi's own account of a man's journey.

The text interweaves dramatised incidents, reflection on character that explores elements of human behaviour and philosophical abstractions about the significance of such behaviour in the context of the Auschwitz experience, and in relation to the question 'what is a man'.