

# The Eternal Potency of Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl*

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## Introduction

In the long-winded tale of human history, some voices have achieved immortality by leaving a mark on generation after generation. One of these poignant voices is that of Anne Frank: a Jewish girl growing up in the tumultuous years of Nazi occupation of the Netherlands. Today, her plaid-covered diary details her experiences while navigating her coming of age and the changing society around her, posing a testament to the resilience of the human spirit. Frank's inextinguishable legacy is a symbol of hope for Jews around the world in view of her optimism in the insidious face of antisemitism.

This investigation aims to explore Anne Frank's life and encounters with antisemitism, providing a historical and literary response to her diary against the backdrop of German-occupied Europe

and the Holocaust. Moreover, this paper will delve into the seemingly eternal relevance of Anne Frank's legacy in the ongoing fight against antisemitism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Setting forth on this journey through history, literature, and education, the goal is to uncover Anne Frank's lasting impact on the world. Throughout this exploration, the objective is not only to understand the past but also to learn important lessons for today and tomorrow while prioritizing remembrance and awareness. This paper will thus attempt to answer how Anne Frank's diary seems to have an eternal potency through the lens of antisemitism.

### **Historical Background**

Antisemitism is a long-winded tale of the worst facet of humanity: hatred. It dates back to centuries ago, often referred to as the "most ancient hatred" attesting to its deep rooted and unforgiving nature. Ancient times witnessed the first presence of anti-Jewish sentiments, especially during Greco-Roman persecutions. However, these sentiments gained momentum with the deicide conspiracy, accusing Jews of being responsible for Jesus' death. Antisemitism adapted to these developing historical circumstances, continuing into the medieval era with accusations of Jews kidnapping and murdering Christian children and spreading illnesses.

Then, as Jews assimilated into European society, new conspiracy theories emerged encircling Jewish power and financial literacy. During the Nazi occupation of parts of Europe, antisemitism was viewed through a racial lens, deeming Jews as an inferior race and the Aryans as superior. Matters began to worsen for Jews with Hitler's rise to power and the establishment of Nazism. Undoubtedly the most dire of times for Jews, the Holocaust stands as the most large scale genocide the world has ever seen, killing over six million people.

Antisemitism in German-occupied Europe was all-consuming, reaching a dimension never seen before. Life for Jews in Nazi occupied areas was filled with fear and discrimination, leading to the horrific events of the Holocaust. The lasting impact of this dark time is a powerful reminder of the dangers of hatred and intolerance. During this time, Hitler's policies induced terror amongst both Jewish adults and youth to an unimaginable extent. Organizations like Hitler Youth were set up to indoctrinate the next generation with Nazi ideologies, passing on antisemitic principles and keeping their flame ablaze. In the German ghettos, Jewish children faced dire hunger, disease, and a lack of basic necessities. Since these children were too young for forced labor, the German authorities often chose them, along with the elderly and disabled, as the first to be sent to concentration camps. The impending doom of this amongst the Jewish youth is a disheartening tale; one that is uniquely told through Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl*. What may merely seem like the narrative of a teenage girl in fact provides profound insight and a social commentary on the political climate of German-occupied Europe, as well as the trepidation of everyday life as a Jew living through the second World War.

### **Anne Frank's Life**

Born in Frankfurt, Germany, on June 12, 1929, Anne Frank became a symbol of bravery and hope during one of the most dire times in human history. Her Jewish family fled the Nazi regime's persecution and found refuge in Amsterdam in 1933. However, when the occupation tightened its hold, the Franks created an underground "Secret Annex" tucked away inside Otto Frank's office building. Inside this secret haven, Anne began writing down her feelings and ideas in a journal that she received on her thirteenth birthday. She chronicled the day-to-day struggles

and anxieties of a teenager navigating coming of age and grappling with the fear of being found by the Gestapo. During the span of two years spent in seclusion, she meticulously observed the gradual decline in the quality of life for both Jews and the larger population. This included a noticeable surge in poverty, coupled with a growing hatred towards Jews. What was particularly distressing was the exploitation of Jewish suffering and the frequent arrests orchestrated by the Gestapo and their Dutch collaborators, highlighting a disturbing trend of capitalizing on their misery. By capturing the nuances of the systematic targeting of the Jewish population, Anne Frank's observations contribute to a broader understanding of the impact of prejudice and oppression.

However, in 1944, the annex was discovered, leading to their arrest by the Gestapo. Anne and her sister Margot were ultimately sent to Auschwitz and then another concentration camp where Anne tragically passed away from typhus at the age of 15. The sole survivor of the Frank family, Otto Frank, returned after the war and published *The Diary of a Young Girl* with the help of Miep Gies. Translated into a plethora of languages, Anne's narrative is an impactful testament to the strength of the human spirit. Even though Anne experienced substantial defeatism, she never let go of her aspirations for her future and a better world. Her belief in the inherent goodness of humans, although dented by the inhumanity of the Nazi rule outside her annex, fought to make it through these tough times. Moreover, Anne exhibited a remarkable level of wisdom, especially considering her young age. In her diary, she displays a keen understanding of human nature, a deep introspection, and a capacity for self-reflection that goes beyond her years. The Anne Frank House in Amsterdam, where the family hid, stands as a museum and educational center dedicated to preserving Anne's memory and educating future generations about the Holocaust.

Anne's legacy further lives on through this diary: a historical account of mankind's darkest chapters.

As Anne endured these tumultuous times, she tried to keep a positive outlook on humanity's goodness. Quotes from her diary such as "Think of all the beauty still left around you and be happy." and "Despite everything, I believe that people are really good at heart." are evidence of her hope in humanity, even as a mere child who is seeing their most hateful side. However, owing to human nature, even a positive character like Anne experienced extreme pessimism throughout her years in the annex. For instance, on November 8, 1943, Anne, having spent over a year in the annex, expressed growing worry about her family's survival amidst the war. Her quote "I see the eight of us in the Annex as if we were a patch of blue sky surrounded by menacing black clouds" conveys her alternating between imagining her future and fearing discovery, she uses nature to convey her sense of entrapment. The blue sky symbolizes freedom, hidden by dark clouds representing the Gestapo and Nazis. Anne's yearning for the safety of a blue sky is therefore a poignant metaphor for a freedom which feels out of reach.

In another quote "I sometimes wonder if anyone will ever understand what I mean, if anyone will ever overlook my ingratitude and not worry about whether or not I'm Jewish and merely see me as a teenager badly in need of some good, plain fun." from December 24, 1943, Anne expresses that she is a normal young girl who has been thrust into abnormal circumstances. She promptly makes sacrifices and accepts the annex's bounds since she knows she is better off than her friends who have already been taken to concentration camps. This approach reflects Anne's commendable maturity, yet it also dampens her spirit. Anne simply longs for a normal childhood,

aside from the desire to return to the comfort she had before the war. She does not want to live in a world where her ethnic background, her faith, or how she behaves are all so important.

Anne's diary vividly describes the constant fear of being discovered by the Nazis, causing deep anxiety and pessimism due to the potential consequences for being Jewish during the Holocaust.

As she becomes more aware of the atrocities committed by the Nazis, her writings show a growing understanding of the seriousness of the situation, leading to overwhelming despair.

Living in hiding, Anne faces limitations and confinement, enduring restrictions on her freedom and missing out on a normal adolescence, resulting in frustration and pessimism. Despite these challenges, Anne's ability to find moments of joy and beauty is seen by many as a testament to the resilience of the human spirit.

Initially optimistic and believing in people's goodness, Anne's outlook changes as hiding becomes more difficult. Discrimination and the constant threat of discovery force her to confront the darker side of human nature. The constraints of hiding, fear of persecution, and limited freedom contribute to her growing frustration and disillusionment. However, Anne doesn't completely lose hope, continuing to dream of a better world. Her evolving perspective reflects the interplay between youthful idealism and the harsh realities of the world.

Her diary entries abruptly end with this one: "I get cross, then sad, and finally end up turning my heart inside out, the bad part on the outside and the good part on the inside, and keep trying to find a way to become what I'd like to be and what I could be if . . . if only there were no other people in the world" after which she was arrested and taken to Auschwitz by the Gestapo. It

strangely concludes Anne's transforming journey and personal growth within the annex quite well. It encapsulates Anne's struggles with her changing identity due to puberty and self-perception during her hidden existence. She tried to find herself while in hiding and grasp her link to the deep hatred and misery outside the walls of the annex. While Anne believed in her inherent kindness, she understood the restrictions that came with her captivity, waiting for the war to end so she can be who she truly wants to be. The meaning of Anne's entry becomes clearer as we learn that who she refers to as "other people" murder her in a concentration camp soon after. Unfortunately, Anne is denied the chance to reach her full potential and truly become the kind person she wishes to be.

### **Significance of the Diary**

*The Diary of a Young Girl* stands as a profoundly significant historical document, leaving an enduring legacy that extends beyond its pages. It delivers a poignant and intimate perspective on the harsh realities of life during the Holocaust, offering a unique account of the human experience amidst the oppressive Nazi regime. By humanizing the unimaginable tragedy of the Holocaust, the diary gives voices to the millions who struggled and perished, creating a personal narrative that resonates across time and spreads awareness about these periods of paramount antisemitism.

Employed as an educational tool, Anne's diary also serves as a resource for teaching students about the Holocaust and its lessons. Its impact is deepened by translations into numerous languages, allowing Anne's story to transcend cultural boundaries and reach an international audience. Its global themes of resilience and the pursuit of humanity in the face of adversity

moves readers from various diverse backgrounds. Moreover, beyond its historical and educational impact, Anne's diary has achieved literary status as a classic. Its authenticity and cultural relevance have incited adaptations into plays, films, and other forms. Through these media, Anne Frank's story continues to captivate audiences, ensuring that her message remains relevant in the contemporary realms of human rights and prejudice.

### **Conclusion**

Anne Frank's legacy goes beyond the literary landscape, serving as an inspiration for activism and advocacy even in the modern day. In essence, Anne Frank's diary stands as a multifaceted symbol of the strength of the human spirit, offering deep historical understanding and serving as a perpetual emblem of hope. It encourages reflection on the past and learning from it, and urges collective efforts toward a future where such atrocities are never repeated. The diary remains relevant in today's discussions on the persisting issue of antisemitism. While the diary captures the dehumanization faced by Jews during that dark period, its relevance extends to contemporary instances of antisemitism which persist globally in various forms such as hate speech, discrimination, and violence against Jewish individuals and communities.

Especially during the current conflict between Israel and Palestine, Anne Frank's narrative is greatly relevant. Hamas's attack on Israel on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023 killed 1300 Jews, standing as the largest antisemitic genocide following the Holocaust. Reminding Jews of the trauma of the Holocaust, this attack speaks to the unfortunately undying nature of antisemitism. Youth in Israel during the October attacks may have experienced similar things to Anne Frank, finding refuge in her memory and indestructible spirit. However, it is not only Jews that look up to the unswerving



character of Anne Frank, but people all around the world from different countries and cultures. An image of ambition is one that all of us need during trying times. Anne Frank is exactly that, having earned her legacy of maturity, pointing to a better future.

Anne Frank is, as aforementioned, a symbol of resilience, particularly in the face of antisemitism. Her diary, written during the Holocaust, depicts the brutal realities of discrimination while also pointing to a better society. Anne, along with her family and fellow Jews in hiding, faced persecution solely based on their Jewish identity. The diary vividly captures the fear, uncertainty, and anguish experienced by those targeted by antisemitic ideologies. Despite her difficulties, Anne trusted in the kindness of humanity. Today, she reminds us of the serious consequences of antisemitism and inspires us to fight together to eradicate prejudice, envisioning a world in which everyone is accepted. Anne Frank's legacy points us in the direction of understanding, compassion, and a world free of prejudice.

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