

Individual Learning Packet

**Teaching Unit**

# **The Devil's Arithmetic**

by Jane Yolen

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# The Devil's Arithmetic

## Introduction

*The Devil's Arithmetic* is a National Jewish Book Award winner and an *American Bookseller* Pick of the Lists. It is the story of how thirteen-year-old Hannah Stern comes to appreciate her Jewish Heritage and the importance of remembering a painful past.

The novel opens with Hannah grumbling her way through the traditions at her family's Passover Seder, which happens to coincide with Easter this year. Why must her family eat bitter herbs, while her Christian friends get to eat jellybeans? Why does her Grandpa Will become angry when he watches World War II footage on television? Why are all Jewish holidays about remembering? Hannah wants answers, and soon she will learn why her family spends so much time honoring a past most people would long to forget.

Students will be able to glean facts about the Holocaust from this historically accurate tale. All the while, they will identify with Hannah's struggle, first to understand her family, and then to save it.

All references come from the Puffin Books edition of *The Devil's Arithmetic*, published 1988.

# The Devil's Arithmetic

## Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. define and cite examples from the text of the following literary terms:
  - allegory
  - euphemism
  - irony
  - metaphor
  - onomatopoeia
  - protagonist
  - simile
  - tone
  - verisimilitude
  - personification
2. discuss the significance of Hannah Stern becoming Aunt Eva's friend Chaya Abramowicz, as opposed to Hannah becoming anyone else in the story.
3. identify the roles humor, song, and prayer play in *The Devil's Arithmetic*.
4. compare and contrast Hannah before she is transported into the past with Hannah after she returns from her life as Chaya.
5. write detailed character sketches of Hannah, Aunt Eva, and Grandpa Will.
6. describe the significance of the number tattoos applied to prisoners in the concentration camps.
7. define the vocabulary words from each chapter of *The Devil's Arithmetic*.
8. identify and discuss the ways in which the Nazis gradually stripped the Jews of their power and individual identities, and attempted to dehumanize them.
9. discuss how Yolen combines fictional characters with historical fact to create *The Devil's Arithmetic*, and how this proves effective in lending verisimilitude.
10. identify and discuss the ways in which Hannah's character serves as a hero, not merely a protagonist in Yolen's novel.
11. define round/dynamic and flat/static character types, and identify them in the novel.

# The Devil's Arithmetic

## Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Refer to passages from *The Devil's Arithmetic* to explain the significance of the tattoos applied to prisoners in the concentration camps. Why did the Nazis tattoo prisoners? How did the characters in the story react to it, and what meanings did they assign to the tattoos?
2. During the time Hannah Stern lives as Chaya Abramowicz, she learns lessons and undergoes many changes. Discuss the effects on Hannah of her having temporarily become someone else.
3. Why do you think author Jane Yolen describes characters and settings with such painstaking detail after Hannah becomes Chaya, as compared to her very limited descriptions in the first three chapters of *The Devil's Arithmetic*?
4. Dramatic irony applies when a character perceives a situation in a very limited way while the reader, perhaps through another character, sees the bigger picture. Discuss why the following passage from *The Devil's Arithmetic* is a prime example of dramatic irony.

"Please, Rabbi," she pleaded, "we must *do* something. And quickly. I know where they are taking us. I am from the future. *Please.*" Rabbi Boruch cleared his throat before speaking. "All children are from the future. I am from the past. And the past tells us what we must do in the future....So you must listen to me when I tell you that what we must do now is pray."

5. A euphemism is the substitution of unpleasant words or phrases with more acceptable ones. From the text, identify and list the euphemisms the Nazis used to refer to the Jews and the extermination of the Jews. Why did the Nazis use euphemisms? Why did the Jews use them?
6. Describe the relationship between Hannah and her Aunt Eva and Grandpa Will. How do they relate to each other before Hannah goes back in time? How do they interact after her return? Do you think Aunt Eva understands what happened to Hannah?
7. A protagonist is merely the main character, the center of attention in a novel. The protagonist may be flat or round. A hero, on the other hand, is a round and dynamic character, learning from experience, developing new strengths, and recognizing new truths. Cite examples from the text that demonstrate the ways in which Hannah is a hero.
8. What does Yolen's use of Yiddish and German add to the novel? How would the novel have been different without it?
9. Identify the main conflict in *The Devil's Arithmetic*. Who participates in the conflict? Who is the protagonist, and who or what is the antagonist? How is the conflict resolved?

# The Devil's Arithmetic

## Chapter One

### Vocabulary

**Haggadah** – text read at Seder service

**Nazis** – members of German Fascist party 1933-1944

**Passover** – Jewish holiday commemorating liberation from Egypt

**Seder** – feast and service on the first two nights of Passover

**Yiddish** – Jewish German

**unleavened** – flat, without yeast

1. The novel opens with what event, and why is it important to Hannah's family?

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2. Explain why Hannah does not want to attend Grandpa Will's Seder.

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3. Why does Hannah's mother insist she go to the Seder?

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4. How does Hannah react to the knock at the door, and why?

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5. How does the author describe Yitzchak, and how does the reader know that Yitzchak likes Gitl?

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6. By describing the setting and the people in such great detail in this chapter, what does Yolen convey to her readers? Explain how her descriptions contribute to an air of verisimilitude?

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## Chapter Fifteen

### Vocabulary

**blokova** – prisoner in charge of newcomers

**burnished** – polished

**cauldron** – huge cooking pot

**Kaddish** – prayer for the dead

**gaudy** – garish, tacky

**luminous** – shining brightly

**ominously** – creating dread

**pervasive** – spread throughout

**sonorous** – rich in sound

1. About how many children are there in the camp? How do they know when to hide in the garbage dump? Describe what happens.

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2. Where is Hannah assigned to work, and what does her job entail?

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3. How does Hannah get a relatively good job, instead of hauling wood with the men?

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