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Elie Wiesel Summary Analysis

            During World War Two, Elie Wiesel, a fifteen-year-old boy, was taken from his home, separated from his family, and put into multiple concentration camps before Wiesel was rescued in nineteen-forty-five. His father, mother, and one of his sisters died before Wiesel and his two sisters were freed from the camps. Wiesel and his wife founded The Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity, and its sole purpose was to fight the indifference, bigotry, and injustice he felt during World War Two. In nineteen-ninety-nine, Wiesel was invited by Hilary Clinton to speak at the 1999 White House Millennium Evenings to share his lecture on The Perils of Indifference. In Wiesel’s lecture, he argued that the world must turn away from indifference by explaining his fear of the future, the dangers of indifference, and the benefits of compassion.

Wiesel begins his speech with gratitude but worries about the next century. Wiesel starts his speech by stating that gratitude defines humanity and how grateful he is to the American people for freeing him from the Nazis when he was a child. He is also thankful for Hilary Clinton and how she’s trying to help the children, the homeless, and the victims of injustice and victims of society and destiny. Wiesel switches to talk about the future and wonders how the new millennium will look at the twentieth century. He said “What will the legacy of this vanishing century be? How will it be remembered in the new millennium?” Wiesel then shared the failures of the twentieth century, and at the end of the speech, Wiesel says, “and together we walk towards the new millennium, carried by profound fear and extraordinary hope.”

Wiesel argues that indifference pushes us to turn away from our humanity. Wiesel defines indifference as the line between good and evil, or simply, not caring towards others or anything, and wonders if indifference is necessary for humans to live peacefully. Wiesel argues that indifference can be tempting because it is easier to block out the victims of injustice and continue with our lives than care for strangers. Still, everyone around would be nothing but an idea to those indifferent. Wiesel brings up the Muselmanners, people in the concentration camps who could not sense their surroundings and, in a sense, were alive but dead at the same time, to show how indifference is no different from the Muselmanners; both are alive but feel nothing from anything. In the beginning, Wiesel said, “Gratitude is what defines the humanity of the human being” and said, “Indifference reduces the other to an abstraction.” These together show that indifference removes the individual’s ability to be fully human because being indifferent removes all feelings and thoughts toward others.

Wiesel wishes the world will learn and become less indifferent. Wiesel goes back to talk about his time in the concentration camps and how he and others hoped that the rest of the world did not know about the tragedies happening in Auschwitz and Treblinka because they believed the rest of the world would intervene if they knew. However, Wiesel then shares that America did know and, with that knowledge, did nothing to help. America continued to stay indifferent towards the Jews. The tale of St. Louis, where a thousand Jews were sent back to Germany after reaching America and when America continued to do business with Germany, and this allowed Germany to continue their war against Europe, proved America was indifferent towards the victims of the Nazis. Later, America joined NATO to get involved in Kosovo and save the victims instead of staying off the sidelines. Wiesel wonders, “Does it mean we have learned from the past? Does it mean that society has changed? Has the human being become less indifferent and more human?” Wiesel ends his speech by sharing the fate of children during the time of war and is hoping the future will stop being indifferent and save them.

            Wiesel hopes that in the following millennium, the world will stop being indifferent and instead help the victims of injustice. Wiesel shared his gratitude for the American people and their actions to help stop Germany from continuing their injustice across Europe. His speech ends with, “and together we walk towards the new millennium, carried by profound fear and extraordinary hope,” meaning Wiesel fears the new millennium could repeat the mistakes of the twentieth century but simultaneously believes the world is moving away from indifference. Indifference stops people from feeling the cries of others. Still, it also removes the joy gained by others, leaving indifferent people with nothing, somebody who continues to move and live but has nothing to live for. Wiesel explained that Jews in concentration camps hoped that America was ignorant of their circumstances because they believed America would save them if America knew. However, America knew for a while but stayed indifferent towards them and even refused to help those who escaped and allowed the war to continue with trading between America and Germany. Weisel ends the speech with the hope that the world becomes less indifferent.