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*“*The Perils of Indifference*”* Rhetorical Situation

Before the new millennium, Elie Wiesel spoke to the people in America and the world about their problems during the twentieth century. The twentieth century held two World Wars, plenty of civil wars, and even more assassinations, and all this violence was an act of indifference. According to Wiesel, indifference puts people in a state of neutrality, where there is no right and wrong or good and evil. There is no difference.In “The Perils of Indifference,” Elie Wiesel effectively employed rhetorical situations by utilizing text, rhetor, audience, purpose, and Kairos to argue that the world must prevent indifference to have a just world in the next century.

Wiesel effectively utilized text to argue the dangers of indifference. “The Perils of Indifference uses persuasive logic or evidence. The use of persuasive logic allows Wiesel to persuade the audience with his words and prove that indifference is an illness to humanity and that the world needs to move away from indifference if it wishes to live in peace. Using evidence gives Wiesel’s speech more credibility and supports his cause to end indifference.

“The Perils of Indifference” has two mediums: the original medium was an oral presentation with a TV broadcast, and the second medium was printed text. The oral presentation allows the audience to hear a victim of indifference voice his concerns about the future and how indifference affected himself and the whole twentieth century. The oral presentation allows Wiesel’s lecture to gain more support and credibility. Printed text, however, allows more detailed analysis of his text and allows other non-English countries to read his lecture in their language if they were not able to understand the TV broadcast, allowing the world to know his dream of the future and how indifference caused the tragedies of the twentieth century.

The rhetor’s background successfully shows the dangers of indifference.  In 1928, Wiesel was born in Sighet. Later, he and his family were deported to the Nazi concentration camps, and they got separated. Before his family could be liberated in nineteen forty-five, his parents and one of his three sisters died. Wiesel then became a journalist and human rights activist. Wiesel’s first few paragraphs focused on a little boy who was put into the concentration camps and was freed by American troops.

Wiesel said, “A young Jewish boy from a small town in the Carpathian Mountains woke up, not far from Goethe’s beloved Weimar, in a place of eternal infamy called Buchenwald. He was finally free” and after said, “and now, I stand before you, Mr. President -- Commander-in-Chief of the army that freed me” indicating that this little boy was Wiesel when the Americans freed him. “The Perils of Indifference” is spoken by a survivor of the concentration camps, a physical embodiment of indifference. It gives Wiesel’s lecture the credibility it needs if Wiesel wishes for the world to listen to his advice.

Wiesel hoped a worldwide audience would unite countries and combine forces to stop indifference. The primary audience of “The Perils of Indifference” was the people, everyone. The world can only be indifferent if people allow it, so the best way to remove indifference is to stop people from allowing it. “The Perils of Indifference” was broadcast on TV with an in-person audience, allowing influential people and everyone else to hear Wiesel’s hopes for the twenty-first century. Wiesel spoke at the Clinton’s Millenium Lecture Series, giving Wiesel a large audience to persuade the dangers indifference brings.

 During Wiesel’s lecture, the only references he makes are considered significant or commonly known because he wants everyone to understand his message, no matter who is watching. Wiesel could share more examples of indifference, maybe ones that happened before the twentieth century, but this would require him to explain the event in detail, and it would be harder to persuade his audience because the less known the event is, the harder it is to persuade the audience with it. This would limit Wiesel’s audience to the knowledgeable, and those who are not would not be persuaded or believe in Wiesel and would not bring people away from indifference. Wiesel only used events in the twentieth century and events that happened in World War Two because everyone listening knows the tragedies and how horrific it is to live during a World War.

Wiesel knew removing indifference from the world would take more than one audience and one lecture. Having his lecture recorded and written allows future generations to read and listen to his message and understand how terrible it is to be indifferent and what would happen if we ever went back to being indifferent. Sharing the same message in the future allows Wiesel to remove indifference and keep it from returning to the world.

The primary purpose of Wiesel’s lecture is to limit indifference and bring human rights to all.  Near the end of his speech, Wiesel says, “But this time, the world is not silent. This time, we do respond. This time, we intervene” and “Together we walk towards the new millennium, carried by profound fear and extraordinary hope” showing his audience how good the world could be without indifference and how like him, we should all hope for a future without indifference.

Wiesel’s rhetorical exigence is, as the lecture name implies, “The Perils of Indifference,” and to showcase his exigence, Wiesel shares that “the Pentagon knew, the State Department knew” about the unjust actions the Nazis were performing against the Jews and shares “the depressing tale of St. Louis . . . human cargo -- maybe 1,000 Jews -- was turned back to Nazi Germany . . . and that ship, which was already on the shores of the United States, was sent back,” showing the audience the effects of being indifferent and how America’s indifference affects the lives of thousands of Jews. All this indifference from America and the world required Wiesel to give and share this lecture with everyone because it cannot happen again if humanity wishes peace.

Wiesel used Kairos to bring his lecture more attention and credibility. Wiesel acquired a large audience because of the occasion this year brings. The year Wiesel shared his speech was 1999, and it was held at the White House, where the Clintons hosted a Millennium Evening event to celebrate the new century. Wiesel used appropriate decorum in his lecture when he said, “gratitude is a word that I cherish. Gratitude is what defines the humanity of the human being” because gratitude is the feeling people get when others care about them. People can only care for others if they are not indifferent, making it the most incredible feeling humans should strive for. Another appropriate decorum in his lecture is “indifference is not a beginning, it is an end. And, therefore, indifference is always the friend of the enemy, for it benefits the aggressor -- never his victim, whose pain is magnified when he or she feels forgotten,” giving words to how the Jews felt at being forgotten by the world and the feeling of being invisible to the world.

In his lecture, Wiesel used appropriate pertinence to prove his point on indifference further. One example is Wiesel’s questioning, “Why did some of America’s largest corporations continue to do business with Hitler’s Germany until 1942? It has been suggested, and it was documented, that the Wehrmacht could not have conducted its invasion of France without oil obtained from American sources,” proving that America’s indifference allowed Hitler to continue to torture the Jews and victims of his conquering. Another example Wiesel gave was “the joint decision of the United States and NATO to intervene in Kosovo and save those victims . . . But this time, the world was not silent. This time, we do respond. This time, we intervene” because Wiesel wanted to show what the world could be like if no country were indifferent.

The exigency of Wiesel’s speech is that indifference must be destroyed worldwide. If it is not, there will always be the possibility of another World War Two, and more victims, like the Jews, will be forgotten and looked away from the world. The Clintons had Wiesel share his lecture because he was a victim of World War Two, the most significant uses of indifference the world has seen, and he was already fighting against indifference and fights for world peace, making him the best speaker for the next century.

Wiesel used rhetorical situations in his lecture to fight against indifference and a better future. His lecture used persuasive logic to argue his claim about indifference and the effects it brought, and he used oral presentation and printed text mediums to share his lecture with a large audience. Wiesel was a World War Two victim and lost half of his family before he was freed, and this makes his lecture more authentic because Wiesel lived through the indifference America showed him. The audience Wiesel wanted was the people, and he tried to persuade the people’s hearts because the people control the country, and peace cannot be achieved with indifferent countries. Wiesel’s focus was to show how indifference changed the outcome of World War Two and what would happen if the world stepped in when injustice occurred. Wiesel used the Millennium Evening event to share his hopes and dreams of the future, hoping that others would agree with him and that the world could move on from the tragedies of World War Two and become more unified.

Works Cited

1. Wiesel, Elie. “The Perils of Indifference.” *The History Place*, April 12, 1999, [https://history.hanover.edu/courses/excerpts/111wiesel.htmlLinks to an external site.](https://history.hanover.edu/courses/excerpts/111wiesel.html).