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Rhetorical Analysis

Elie Wiesel's speech, "The Perils of Indifference", is an effective piece of rhetorical work as it aims to spread awareness of the harm brought on by indifference. Wiesel uses ethos, pathos, and logos in his speech to convey his message. As a holocaust survivor himself, Elie is able to identify with those who are victims of indifference. He lists numerous tragedies that occurred during the 20th century that were prolonged due to the tendency of humans being indifferent. His personal experience combined with knowledge of other historical events which were affected by indifference are what make his argument more effective. His goal is to leave his audience with the same hope he has of a better future for the centuries to come.

Wiesel's speech was given at the White House on April 12, 1999. The speech was part of the 7th iteration of the Millennium Evenings lecture series hosted by the President and First Lady. The speech was broadcasted on the internet, TV, and radio to the whole country so Wiesel had a large audience. The message within his speech was intended for all humans to hear, both young and old. Wiesel urges our species to see the error of our ways and do what we can to establish a better future for mankind.

The speech begins with Wiesel addressing his audience and recalling the time he was liberated by American soldiers during the Holocaust and expresses his gratitude for the American people. He brings up the changing of the century that is approaching and challenges

his audience to think about how the passing century will be remembered. He cites the numerous wars, assassinations, bloodbaths, and inhumanities that took place. Wiesel accredits these tragedies not only to violence but to indifference. He explains how seductive the state of indifference is as it allows us to live freely without taking on others burdens. He continues on by arguing that indifference is a state that is more dangerous than hatred or anger. This is because indifference is never administered in creative ways and elicits no response. To be indifferent means reducing others to an abstraction. In doing so, people are denied their humanity which in turn betrays our own. In saying all of this, Wiesel is attempting to stress the importance of the lessons that can be learned from indifference that occurred in the 20th century. As a man who experienced indifference first hand, he expresses his frustration that was built within him once he figured out people were aware of what was happening in Europe during World War 2 but took so long to finally intervene. Wiesel then switches things around by addressing some of the triumphs that occurred during the 20th century. In doing so, he begs the question, have we learned from our mistakes? His closing remarks express the fear and hope he has as the people headed into the 21st century.

To make their words resonate with and impact their audience, speakers often use rhetorical appeals in their speeches. Wiesel uses ethos, pathos, and logos within his speech. Ethos is an ethical appeal, pathos is an emotional appeal, and logos is a logistical appeal. There are a few instances where Wiesel appeals to his audience using ethos. In the first instance Wiesel uses his personal experience as a Holocaust survivor to appeal to his audience. Wiesel says, "If they knew, we thought, surely those leaders would have moved heaven and earth to intervene. They would have spoken out with great outrage and conviction. They would have bombed the

railways leading to Birkenau, just the railways, just once.” Here he’s addressing what it’s like inside the mind of a victim of indifference. He felt as though surely if people knew how the millions of Jewish people were being treated during the Holocaust, people would intervene and put an end to it. Doing so would clearly be the ethical thing to do. However, the Americans did not intervene and put a stop to the suffering immediately, the only reason the United States joined the war was because they too began getting attacked. In his next instance of the use of ethos, Wiesel says, “Why didn't he allow these refugees to disembark? A thousand people -- in America, the great country, the greatest democracy, the most generous of all new nations in modern history. What happened? I don't understand. Why the indifference, on the highest level, to the suffering of the victims?” It’s known that Americans take pride in their country being a symbol of freedom and democracy. Wiesel takes this sentiment and compares it alongside an instance in which over a thousand lives could’ve been saved if America had lived up to its reputation. What magnifies the issue with the instance, is the lack of reasoning for the decision that would eventually lead to the deaths of at least 1,000 Jewish people already on the shores of the United States. At this point in time the Holocaust had already begun so why weren’t these refugees spared? This question is one concerning ethics that appeals to the audience.

The next appeal used by Wiesel is pathos. The first example is when he says, “Wrapped in their torn blankets, they would sit or lie on the ground, staring vacantly into space, unaware of who or where they were -- strangers to their surroundings. They no longer felt pain, hunger, thirst. They feared nothing. They felt nothing. They were dead and did not know it.” Here he is referring to the people that were called the “Muselmänner”. The Muselmänner were the people who could not suffer the pain that indifference had brought upon them any longer, they had lost

all hope for their futures. By depicting the state that some victims of indifference can go into Wiesel is appealing to his audience's emotions. This story evokes feelings of sadness and anger for those that lost their will to live. Wiesel goes on to say, "What about the children? Oh, we see them on television, we read about them in the papers, and we do so with a broken heart. Their fate is always the most tragic, inevitably. When adults wage war, children perish. We see their faces, their eyes. Do we hear their pleas? Do we feel their pain, their agony? Every minute one of them dies of disease, violence, famine." This quotation appeals strongly to audiences' emotions. Collateral damage of the worst kind is that of the lives of innocent children. Thousands if not millions of children become victims of wars brought on by the people that are supposed to be establishing their future. Wiesel is trying to drive home the point that indifference will spare no expense as it ravages on as the ultimate evil. Innocent lives are lost because people are too bothered to take on more than their responsibilities to themselves.

The final appeal Wiesel uses is that of logos. He firstly says, "These failures have cast a dark shadow over humanity: two World Wars, countless civil wars, the senseless chain of assassinations (Gandhi, the Kennedys, Martin Luther King, Sadat, Rabin), bloodbaths in Cambodia and Algeria, India and Pakistan, Ireland and Rwanda, Eritrea and Ethiopia, Sarajevo and Kosovo; the inhumanity in the gulag and the tragedy of Hiroshima. And, on a different level, of course, Auschwitz and Treblinka. So much violence; so much indifference." Here Wiesel is simply listing some of the many devastating events that occurred throughout the 20th century. These events occurred and there's no denying it which is why it is an appeal of logos. He then goes on to say, "“And yet, my friends, good things have also happened in this traumatic century: the defeat of Nazism, the collapse of communism, the rebirth of Israel on its ancestral soil, the

demise of apartheid, Israel's peace treaty with Egypt, the peace accord in Ireland.” In saying this Wiesel is contrasting his prior list of events that unfolded within the 20th century. Here he is listing some of the better things that occurred which again are indisputable. This contrast between good and bad occurrences is an attempt by Wiesel to make his audience question themselves on whether or not mankind has, can, or will improve for future generations.

“The Perils of Indifference” by Elie Wiesel is an effective piece of rhetorical work. This claim is supported by Wiesel’s use of ethos, pathos, and logos within the speech. The speech aims to explain to the audience how the state of indifference can have devastating consequences. As a Holocaust survivor himself, Wiesel has first hand experience of what it’s like to be a victim of indifference. As the turn of the century slowly approaches, Wiesel recognizes the urgency of how many people's minds need to be opened. To ensure that only the best outcomes occur, he informs his audience of how and why indifference played a large factor in the atrocities of the 20th century. He references his own experience as a Holocaust survivor and those who weren’t as fortunate to survive to appeal to his audiences ethics. He goes on to reference a group of Holocaust prisoners and children who suffered the consequences of war to appeal to his audiences emotions. Wiesel finally lists both the good and bad events that occurred within the 20th century as logistical appeals. Together these pieces make the speech powerful, effective, and persuasive.

Works Cited

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