

# REFLECTIONS ON THE HOLOCAUST

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## PROMPT

You have already spent a great deal of time thinking about and writing about an exemplary rhetorical text of your choice. Your research paper for the semester should include that text as a cornerstone, but should go beyond it to ask a bigger question about why and how rhetoric is effective or ineffective in particular rhetorical situations. Your Research paper should consider multiple texts that are tied together either by topic, time period, or author. Your thesis statement should make an argument about the rhetoric of the texts you are studying and should employ vocabulary learned in this course.

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Actions are a vital part of human existence, for a person's actions not only reflect who they are but also their attitude towards others, since repercussions often impact more than just one person. The Holocaust is a prime example of this concept because people's actions—both their choice to act and their choice not to prevent it—allowed the ongoing suffering of many other human beings. The Holocaust can be defined as “the deliberate annihilation of approximately 6 million European Jews by the Nazis before and during World War II.”<sup>1</sup> The Nazis had the intention to kill Jews, and they conducted their plans in countries that had “well-documented national statistical systems,” making it clear that there were many people other than those high up in the Nazi Regime who knew about or aided in this genocide.<sup>2</sup> When people are reduced to numbers, they are dehumanized, making mass murder easier to commit and ignore. In the poem “More Light! More Light!”, Hecht's fearful tone portrays the Holocaust in a devastating manner that implies that the events that occurred were so unimaginably horrible that it seems as if there cannot be any way to come to terms with what occurred. This contrasts with Elie Wiesel's reflective yet tentatively more positive attitude in his speech, *The Perils of Indifference*, in which

he describes the nature and dangers of being indifferent but also asserts that it is possible to promote healing and positive change as a result of the Holocaust.

Both Anthony Hecht and Elie Wiesel were personally affected by the Holocaust in some way. Hecht, a German-Jewish American, grew up in New York City. He was drafted for World War II, and his experiences during the war often appeared in his poems. During the war, “his unit uncovered the site of mass graves at the Buchenwald concentration camp, a horrifying discovery that caused Hecht to lose his faith.”<sup>3</sup> Hecht offers an outside perspective of the Holocaust from someone who was not directly involved but witnessed the damage. As for Wiesel, he felt the pain himself. He grew up in the small town of Sighet, Transylvania and came from an educated and religious family. Wiesel was very intellectually inclined and often spent his time reading. His commitment to his religion helped him connect with God and realize that through actions, “everything had its order in the universe,” something that he would come to understand more later in his life.<sup>4</sup> Wiesel’s family was affected by World War II when his family was relocated to a ghetto in 1944. There they were separated and sent to death camps.<sup>5</sup> At this point, “Elie’s agony and sense of utter helplessness were beyond words. After that a basic animal fear took over.”<sup>6</sup> He moved from Auschwitz, to Buna, and lastly to Buchenwald, where American soldiers liberated those imprisoned in 1945.<sup>7</sup> Wiesel lived out the remainder of his life trying to come to terms with what had happened, writing stories and narratives based on his experiences, with “the tattoo ‘A-7713’ etched in Wiesel’s skin serv[ing] as a constant reminder that his fiction is horribly real.”<sup>8</sup>

Hecht employs vivid imagery throughout his poem to convey the horrors committed against humanity during the Holocaust and to show his readers how someone can lose faith after witnessing an event like this. He describes the fate of a Polish man who buried two Jewish men alive as ordered only to be “shot in the belly and in three hours” bleed to death.<sup>9</sup> In this situation, the unpredictability of when death will strike heightens the horror, for it is difficult to understand how someone could treat another human in such a way. Hecht portrays this feeling through the line “much casual death has drained away their souls.”<sup>10</sup> He employs the word “causal” to assert that murder has become very easy and is an

everyday occurrence, although such actions caused many to live in constant fear and profoundly damaged faith in humanity. His use of negatively connotative diction in words such as “pitiful” and “quivering” contributes to his fearful and horrified tone and implies that living under these conditions is no way to live, for living like this is detrimental.<sup>11</sup> To evoke the feeling of hopelessness felt by many people, Hecht writes the line, “Bubbled and bursts as he howled for the Kindly Light.”<sup>12</sup> Here, Hecht references the hymn *Lead Kindly Light* by John Henry Newman, a hymn often associated with tragedy and death which expresses Newman’s sorrow over the deaths of his sister and grandmother, to demonstrate the sadness that the inmates had in their hearts as they felt that they had no way to escape their misery.<sup>13</sup> Feeling powerless against the forces of evil makes people question how things became so bad and demoralizes their hopes of ever returning to a normal life again, if they are able to survive at all. It seems to Hecht’s audience that no good can ever come from something so horrible.

Wiesel proceeds differently. He defines and describes the word “indifference” to make the claim that the Holocaust can teach people how to do better toward others in the future. He defines the word “indifference” to stress its significance when the lives of people are at stake. He states that indifference denotatively means “no difference” but then applies the word in context as “not a beginning; it is an end.”<sup>14</sup> Wiesel explains that being indifferent is what leads to a loss of humanity when there is an obvious choice between right and wrong. This is the main focus of the speech because having no empathy for other people is a main cause of the Holocaust. In the way that Wiesel defines the word “indifference” and then puts the word into the context of his own experiences, he gives the word a profoundly negative connotation and causes his audience to reflect upon the nature of a word that they initially believed to be neutral. Next, Wiesel describes indifference as “more dangerous than anger and hatred” to emphasize how wrong it is to be a bystander.<sup>15</sup> Great harm can follow when people fail to take action against wrongdoing. In this way, Wiesel establishes the moral responsibility that his audience has to lessen human suffering as a whole.

Hecht contrasts the concepts of light and darkness to convey the fading outlooks of the people as they realized what their situation

meant for their future. Hecht states “Not light from the shrine at Weimar beyond the hill/ Nor light from heaven appeared.”<sup>16</sup> The light symbolizes any glimmer of hope that the prisoners desperately yearn for. The absence of such light in the darkness represents ever-present human fear and misery. This pain at the concentration camps is also contrasted by Hecht with the “soul’s tranquility” on which Christ judges all men when they die.<sup>17</sup> This is ironic because it is difficult to imagine how any of the prisoner’s souls can be at peace after such traumatic and awful experience. Hecht also develops the theme of loss of humanity due to daily violence through the symbol of the eye. He notes that there is “no light in the blue polish eye” and observes that “black soot...settles upon eyes.”<sup>18</sup> Conventionally, eyes are said to tell about a person’s soul, but in these descriptions it’s as though these people are so removed from what is morally right that they lack a normal human soul. The way they are treated is inhuman. This emotionally connects Hecht to his listening audience because it shows how each person’s actions influence the actions of others. It is frightening to think about how one person’s evil can spread and become more socially acceptable by making people close to the source think less about what is really right and more about going along with what everyone else is doing. Thinking in this manner does not promote individuality but conformity and oppression.

Furthermore, while fully recognizing the great evil that occurred during the Holocaust, Wiesel offers that awareness of what went wrong during this time can help to prevent similar events in the future. He employs cause and effect reasoning to evaluate how the United States’ slowness to act during the Second World War impacted the amount of suffering that occurred amongst innocent people. Wiesel first states that he is thankful that the American soldiers liberated his concentration camp but admits that as a result of all the pain that he endured, “he was finally free, but there was no joy in his heart.”<sup>19</sup> All of his emotions and experiences as a prisoner left a lasting scar. It is clear that if the American soldiers had not freed the camp, the suffering of the people would have continued. However, Wiesel also asserts that this scar could have been less prominent if the Americans had acted as soon as they knew of the horrors occurring. Many lives could have been saved, but because

the United States acted with indifference, the extent of pain and suffering worsened. Additionally, Wiesel observes that America even contributed to the German cause by conducting “business with Hitler’s Germany until 1941” and supplying the oil that made the Wehrmacht invasion into France possible.<sup>20</sup> He implies that these actions would have made a huge impact on the Nazi’s ability to maintain their power, even asserting that if the United States had denied Germany both business and oil, the effects would have greatly impacted other areas of the Nazi regime. Had the United States totally withdrawn their support, such action could have meant wonders to the many people that lost their lives or were permanently scarred by the dehumanizing crimes committed by Nazi Germany. Wiesel is not saying that the suffering of innocent people could have been avoided if the United States had acted sooner, but rather that these horrors could have been lessened. Though the United States did not cause the pain and suffering, their early indifference indirectly affected many lives.

In Hecht’s poem, God and religion are major motifs, serving as forms of solace that people sought in such a difficult time. Hecht contrasts the beliefs of people in the beginning and the end of the poem to demonstrate how alone and lost the inmates came to feel, as they came to believe that God was ignoring them. In the beginning of the poem, people “made prayers in the name of Christ;” however, in the hours of the Polish man’s death, “No prayers or incense rose up,” exemplifying a complete loss of hope similar to what Hecht himself felt after witnessing these horrors.<sup>21</sup> Both Hecht and the victims of the Holocaust he represents began to feel this way because they felt that they were being unjustly punished, for they wanted “God to witness” that they had “made no crime.”<sup>22</sup> The Jewish people believed that if humans do something wrong they shall be punished by God, but it was clear that “no Jewish sin could possibly justify the magnitude of the punishment and no future bounty could possibly redeem it. God’s apparent willingness to dispense with His people showed not anger but indifference.”<sup>23</sup> Because God is supposed to be a constant in people’s lives, to feel as though even God cannot help you is extremely terrifying and devastating.

Life at the concentration camps was unpredictable, and it was

never certain when and if death would strike. Hecht reflects this in particular formal aspects of his poem. The approximate rhyme in only the second and fourth lines in each four-line stanza demonstrates the erratic yet systematic nature of these camps in the way that they conducted their mass murder. Hecht rhymes only two lines in each stanza, and even some of these do not completely match, though they are close and still accomplish the goal of emphasizing their irregularity. This is similar to the way in which, though the Nazis could efficiently kill and dispose of many people in ways that were well thought out and required a great deal of planning, the specific individual people killed each day were chosen at random, and the mode of killing was sometimes unpredictable. The idea of living day-to-day being unsure if you will make it to the next is horrible, and it is amazing how people who have no hope left can find the will to survive.

Despite all this, Wiesel is able to see some positive effects even of the silence of God mentioned in "More Light! More Light!". Wiesel asserts that there are two kinds of silence: "the silence of possibility, community, and creativity: and the silence of chaos, solitude and destruction."<sup>24</sup> This refutes the claim regarding silence made by Hecht in that, though Wiesel does not deny his feeling of abandonment, he asserts that it was this silence that brought people together. People began to lean on each other more in order to get through their traumas. This is positive, for without a sense of unity there would be no will to live and endure the challenges. This makes Wiesel's argument especially effective because, despite his experiences, he looks back at the Holocaust with dignity. Wiesel describes the concept of gratitude as "what defines the humanity of the human being" to relay his thanks for the American troops that freed him from the concentration camp when he was a boy.<sup>25</sup> This establishes Wiesel's credibility as the speaker because not only was he a victim of indifference, but he also first acknowledges and gives thanks to the soldiers who took action and liberated the concentration camps and only later describes the previous times when the U.S. turned away. This demonstrates that Wiesel is not angry about his experience but is trying to share what he has learned from it. He offers "an affective confrontation of his experience, painful to the point of unreal, that allows the possibilities of a more humane world,"

making his speech more persuasive since it highlights that Wiesel did come to terms with what happened and is using what happened to him to change the lives of others.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, because Wiesel has built his ethos in these ways, his argument appeals emotionally to the audience, who recognize that he is speaking on behalf of the greater good. Being indifferent, says Wiesel, is “what makes the human being inhuman” and “is not only a sin, it is a punishment.”<sup>27</sup> This expresses the moral duty that each person has to God and to one another to act when they know something is wrong. Through his presentation, Wiesel makes being an indifferent bystander seem even illogical.

Overall, Wiesel’s speech is more effective in achieving its purpose than Hecht’s writing is in achieving his because Wiesel’s argument involves a call to action. “Despite the uncertainty of life, one point that is supremely clear to Wiesel is that lack of certainty should not deter one’s action...in addition, he hopes that his stories promote his readers to action.”<sup>28</sup> While there is no telling what the future will hold in the upcoming century, Wiesel offers that we should not fear uncertainty but rather that we should just be cautious to avoid committing past mistakes. “Elie Wiesel tells his stories, and even their endings resist leaving his readers with a fixed conclusion. He wants them instead to feel his ‘and yet-and yet,’ which provides a hope that people may keep moving to choose life and not end it.”<sup>29</sup> Through asking people to avoid indifference, Wiesel offers that there is hope for humanity and “transfers responsibility and authority to us, who have become custodians of the tale.”<sup>30</sup> It is clear that Wiesel is aware of his audience because he spends a great deal of time relating what happened to him to the larger scale of humanity. He gives this speech 54 years after the Holocaust to people who might not have any connection to the event. This contributes to the effectiveness of Wiesel’s purpose because it makes the audience consider how their actions make a difference in a grand scheme and almost feel a sense of sadness or guilt about past indifference. It is likely that every person has experienced indifference at some time, either as the victim or the bystander. Wiesel indirectly makes the audience reflect upon their own lives, perhaps causing many to realize how they can do better next time. While Hecht achieves his purpose of conveying the horrors of the Holocaust, his poem

is less persuasive than Wiesel's *The Perils of Indifference* speech, since he himself did not experience the physical pain of being in the concentration camps. While looking back at the history of terrible devastation of the Holocaust is moving, it is more compelling and interesting to see the viewpoint of someone who was in the concentration camps themselves and has learned how to cope and learn from it.

Finally, neither Wiesel nor Hecht diminishes the suffering and lives lost during the Holocaust, but they do offer different perspectives on the event. In a sense, Wiesel places trust in his audience that they will help him to promote the welfare of all human beings. It is this trust that develops the hope that good can come from the Holocaust and that this can hopefully outweigh all of the tragedies that occurred. While this cannot be an easy task, such a mission puts the souls of the victims to rest, knowing that they died for a greater purpose. It is understandable that Hecht would challenge his faith after finding the mass grave and focus his poem on sharing the atrocities committed at concentration camps. Hecht wrote to spread awareness, but Wiesel took it one step further. He prompted change. Instead of dwelling on the past, Wiesel focuses on what the Holocaust means for the future, and—since the past cannot be altered—it is this viewpoint that makes all the difference.

## NOTES

1. William Seltzer, "Population Statistics, the Holocaust, and the Nuremberg Trials," *Population and Development Review* 24, no. 3 (1998): 512. doi:10.2307/2808153. 512.
2. Ibid., 513.
3. "Anthony Hecht (1923-2004)," *The Columbia Granger's World of Poetry*, <http://www.columbiagrangers.org.proxycu.wrlc.org/biography/5159>.
4. Ellen Norman Stern, *Elie Wiesel, Witness for Life* (New York: Katv Pub Inc., 1982), 22.
5. Graham B. Walker, *Elie Wiesel: A Challenge to Theology* (Jefferson: McFarland, 1988), 3.
6. Stern, *Elie Wiesel*, 62.
7. Ibid., 74; Walker, *Elie Wiesel*, 3.
8. Walker, *Elie Wiesel*, 2.
9. Anthony Hecht, "More Light! More Light!" in *Understanding Poetry*, ed. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), 28.
10. Ibid., 21.
11. Ibid., 10.
12. Ibid., 22 and 8.
13. Donald Capps, "A Biographical Footnote to Newman's 'Lead, Kindly Light,'" *Church History* 41, no. 4 (1972): 480-85. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3163878>.

14. Elie Wiesel, "The Perils of Indifference: Lessons Learned from a Violent Century" (speech, White House, Washington, D.C., April 12, 1999).
15. Ibid.
16. Hecht, "More Light! More Light!" 17-18.
17. Ibid., 12.
18. Ibid., 24 and 32.
19. Elie Wiesel, "The Perils of Indifference."
20. Ibid.
21. Hecht, "More Light! More Light!" 11 and 29.
22. Ibid., 4.
23. Guyora Binder, "Representing Nazism: Advocacy and Identity at the Trial of Klaus Barbie," *The Yale Law Journal* 98.7 (1989): 1321. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/796747>.
24. Walker, *Elie Wiesel: A Challenge to Theology*, 40.
25. Elie Wiesel, "The Perils of Indifference."
26. Rosemary Horowitz, ed., *Elie Wiesel and the Art of Storytelling* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2006), 13.
27. Elie Wiesel, "The Perils of Indifference: Lessons Learned from a Violent Century."
28. Horowitz, *Elie Wiesel and the Art of Storytelling*, 39.
29. John K. Roth, "From Night to Twilight: A Philosopher's Reading of Elie Wiesel," *Religion & Literature* 24, no. 1 (1992): 65. JSTOR,

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40059499>.

**30.** Horowitz, *Elie Wiesel and the Art of Storytelling*, 100.