Elie Wiesel's Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech Analysis

The Nobel Prize in Literature of 1986 was awarded to Elie Wiesel for his book *Night*, a chronicling of his struggles in concentration camps during the Holocaust. His acceptance speech of the award was intended to ensure that the events of the Holocaust were not echoed in the future; that no human being would be subjected to the same humiliation and torment that he was.

Wiesel employed the rhetorical devices of pathos and ethos in his speech, with pathos being the predominant appeal utilized. In the opening of his speech he claims that the award does not belong to him, but rather to the “multitudes who have perished” (Line 4). He follows this statement up by saying, “No one may speak for the dead, no one may interpret their mutilated dreams and visions.” In this segment of his speech he reminds the audience that no one person can ever make up for the loss of thousands and that those who lost their lives in concentration camps will never be able express their agony and pain for the advancement of our world. Additionally, Wiesel relates a brief account of his imprisonment in concentration camps from a third person point of view, referring to his fifteen year-old self as “he” rather than “I”. In his account he articulates the suddenness, despair, and the altogether horror of this occurrence in history, saying, “I remember his bewilderment, I remember his anguish. It all happened so fast. The ghetto. The deportation. The sealed cattle car. The fiery altar upon which the history of our people and future of mankind were meant to be sacrificed.” The use of third person makes the boy, young Elie Wiesel, seem nearer to the audience, as though he were fixed in time. The use of first person pronouns would have distanced his anecdote from the audience, as the Wiesel’s years would have obscured it. The pathos of the acceptance speech is in the sole fact that he was a Jew who experienced life in concentration camps which makes him one of the most qualified people to deliver a speech on the subject. There
isn’t any doubt in the listener’s mind on whether Wiesel knows what he is talking about.

Rhetorical devices are used frequently throughout. Wiesel uses anaphora in the aforementioned anecdote, stating, “I remember his bewilderment, I remember his anguish.” Rather than combining these words into one sentence, he divides the feelings into two and repeats the beginning expression to emphasize the feelings he had on being forced from his home. The anaphora also lengthens the anecdote, allowing for the audience to reflect on his emotions and establish an empathy for Wiesel as well as others in the concentration camps, which we know suffered a fate akin to or worse than his own. When Wiesel discusses the Holocaust and concentration camps he does not directly state the words. Instead, his diction is composed of words and phrases that have far clearer connotation as in, “the Kingdom of Night”. Night has an implied feeling of hopelessness and represents the end so it infuses his speech with more emotion than simply stating “a concentration camp”.

Wiesel uses rhetorical devices and appeals to hold up the central idea that the persecution of individuals for political views, race, gender, and religion must be confronted. His speech uses heavy amounts of emotion and is strengthened by the credibility that he has as someone who had experienced concentration camps. This all results in empathy for Wiesel and all who bore a burden of this magnitude. This empathy results in the audience developing an urge to prevent new issues from arising and defend those who are oppressed and martyred. His insight that, “Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim.” and, “Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.” causes one to see the potential for good that we all encompass.

Elie Wiesel spoke to the entire human race in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, using his life story to urge everyone to have compassion for human life and make judgements independent of race, political stance,
gender, religion, or other differences as well as to take action when a group is being denied the right to their lives or dignity.