

Trinity Santaolaya

Professor Warner

ENGL112B

10/3/2021

Book Talk: *White Rose* by Kip Wilson

Author Information



<https://www.kipwilsonwrites.com>

Kip Wilson was a poetry editor for YARN: *Young Adult Review Network*. She holds a Ph.D in German Literature. When Wilson first heard about the White Rose organization in high school, she was compelled to bring Sophie's narrative to life, and tried to find Sophie's voice by retracing her steps. Wilson retraced Sophie's steps by walking from Sophie's apartment to Sophie's university, where Sophie published leaflets of resistance, to Sophie's grave; by doing so, Wilson was able to poetically form Sophie's voice.



Summary

White Rose is a novel written in verse. It is based on the true story of Sophie Scholl, a young woman who grew up in Nazi Germany as Hitler rose to power during World War 2. This book tells of the resistance group—the White Rose— that Sophie and her brother led against the Nazi regime. Despite the risk of their lives, Sophie and other members of the *White Rose* published and distributed anti-Hitler leaflets. Eventually, Sophie, her brother, and other key members of the group were caught and executed for their resistance, but their courageous voices remain timeless. *White Rose* centers on Sophie’s narrative and poetically captures her experience, where participating in non-violent activism is a deadly but morally right decision.

Quotes and their Significance:

Dear Fritz,
People shouldn't be
ambivalent
about the world around
them simply because
everyone else
is ambivalent.

People who
refuse
to open their eyes
are more than ambivalent -
they are guilty.

How can we expect
justice
in this world
if we're not prepared to
sacrifice ourselves
for what's right?

In this section titled “Selfishness” (page 74), Sophie narrates the importance of confidently abiding by our morals. If we do not fully commit to the choices we make and instead let ourselves be torn by indecision, which is the result of being ambivalent, then we are ultimately choosing to not do anything at all, which is in some cases worse than doing something at all. This message is emphasized in the verse by the single lines consisting of ‘ambivalent’, ‘refuse’, and ‘justice’. By being ambivalent, we are refusing justice. Although it is our nature to harbor conflicting feelings, and justice is never perfect because it is founded on human nature, justice is the only thing we have for structuring right from wrong. Sophie associates the people who “refuse / to open their eyes” as guilty of opposing justice because the action of closing one's eyes is, in itself, a conscious decision of not choosing between right or wrong. They have the agency to “refuse” to do so. For people to know about the genocide of Jewish people and other victims but not acknowledge it or take action against it is diminishing the Jewish people's suffering and perpetuating evil, as right and wrong are no longer distinguished.

Judge Freisler asks
 if I have any additional words.
*Many others think
 the same,
 they just don't say
 it
 but someone had to
 make a start.*

The judge laughs,
 a bark from a vicious dog.
 I turn, sweep
 my gaze over the sea of
 uniforms in the courtroom, breathe
 in the heady silence, observe
 the guilt shrouding
 the audience, and I know
 its true,

Even here,
 some do feel the same

Say it,
 I silently beg
 my country,
 this room full
 of Germans.

But no one
 says
 a word.

In this section, “Silence” (page 296), Sophie is being called upon during her trial. Internally, she repeatedly begs people to “say it” -- to make the conscious decision of speaking out against injustice. However, “no one / says / a word.” Their silence is attributed with the overwhelming diction such “heady” or “guilt” which is “shrouding” every person. The consequence of these people’s silence is the guilt and shame that shrouds every part of their being, which almost dehumanizes them, because it is as if they are reduced to the heaviness of their guilt. The dehumanization of the people in the courtroom is further reinforced by the fact that the people in the courtroom are described as “the sea of uniforms”. Through this dehumanization, Wilson conveys that silence as a result of ambivalence not only perpetuates injustice, but it also dehumanizes the individual because it diminishes morality.

They
are going to
murder
us.

I stand small in the wake
of this indisputable fact
as it slowly mixes
with a thin, silky ribbon flowing
through my thoughts, getting
bluer and brighter
than a clear sky
after a storm.

Our deaths
will mean
something.

The world will react,
and someday
someone
will punish
the people
who are doing
these terrible things.

The ribbon widens, flooding
my mind
with a river of hope.

In this section, titled “A Realization” (315), Sophie is receiving her sentence after the trial: she is going to be executed for her non-violent actions. Instead of reacting with resentment over people’s silence, or fear over her own inevitable execution, a feeling that is described gorgeously overcomes her: hope. It is described to become “bluer and brighter / than a clear sky / after a storm” in her mind. The significance of Sophie reacting with not hatred for humans, but with hope and compassion conveys that silence is never static. It can change, just as people may always choose to open their eyes and take action. There is always hope for justice, and in turn, for empathy to prevail so long as the world “reacts” and to human suffering.

Text Complexity:

Lexile Range 1080L.

ATOS Book Level: 7.0

These ranges indicate that in terms of quantitative reading, *White Rose* is not too complex; it should be readable to a seventh grader. Given the sparse words and relatively simple language, I would agree with the quantitative assessment that a seventh grader might be able to grasp the language, but I would disagree with the overall assessment that a seventh grader would be able to understand it.

First, the structure of the *White Rose* is in poetic verse. Although the language of the poem is not difficult to grasp, the structure of the book is unconventional and has to be read differently from a prose novel. There are formal literary elements that the *White Rose* have that are unique to poetry, which requires some background knowledge on how poems are read and structured. Additionally, the *White Rose* is not written in chronological order. It shifts between two periods of time within Sophie's narration: the past, where Sophie made her contribution to the *White Rose*, and the present, where she is being interrogated by the government for taking action against Hitler. The structure of *White Rose* is more difficult to trace than a chronological novel written in prose.

Second, the novel requires background knowledge on the Holocaust and the White Rose organization in order to understand the events that occur within the book. The topic of the Holocaust is, by itself, a difficult and sensitive subject matter and would require careful and extensive teaching. There is a relatively deep cultural and historical knowledge (of both World War 2 and the Holocaust) that a person needs to be familiar with to fully appreciate and understand *White Rose*.

Finally, because the book employs many formal literary elements such as alliteration, figuration, metaphors, and symbolism, there are many layers of meaning woven within *White Rose*. Similar to other poetry analysis, students are able to make their own interpretations of *White Rose* and unravel the many layers behind *White Rose*.

Given the complex structure, necessity of knowing difficult and sensitive historical and cultural context, and its many layers of meaning, *White Rose* is not suited to be read by an average seventh grader. This book should be taught in a high school setting where the requirements for reading and understanding this text are adequately met.

Teaching Resources:

- *TEACHING THIS BOOK*

This book would be best taught in a Holocaust unit for a high school class, from grades nine and above. Before presenting the book, I would define and contextualize the Holocaust, as well as give background information on the White Rose resistance group. I might even teach this after a poetry unit, to explain how this book, which is written in verse, can communicate the beauty of courage and hope, and the importance of taking action despite being so sparse in words. I would ask my class to pick their favorite sections from the book and ask them to identify and observe any formal literary elements (or a lack of formal literary elements) that help formulate Sophie's voice and ambition. In addition, I would ask the class to map out a timeline on the white board to help trace the structure of the novel.

- *AGE LEVEL*

Although this book is quantitatively assessed to be viably read by a seventh grader, this book is qualitatively complex, and should be read to a high school class. I would teach this book to students between the age of 13-18; from 9th grade to 12th grade.

- *Why Should Teens Read this Book*

- Because it provides a rare perspective on the real account of a youth (a young woman) taking stand against something they perceive as larger than them-- in the case of this book and historical event, Sophie takes a stand against the Nazi regime.

- Because it encourages teens to use their voice and participate in activism, to fight for what they believe is morally right and justified, especially if they think or perceive that their voice is being suppressed.
 - Because it shows the impact that teenagers can, and have made, in the world, despite not being an adult. There is power to be found in everyone's voice regardless of one's age.
 - Because it gives them insight and perspective on the Holocaust, an atrocious event that should never reoccur again.
- *Which Categories might this book fit?*

This book would fit in with:

Books about Facing Death and Loss

Throughout the entire novel, Sophie must face the possibility of the death of her lover, brother, and friends, who are sent to the army and must fight in war, as well as the deaths of those who are sent to concentration camps, and the threat of death to her own person when she makes the conscious decision to speak out against injustice.

Books about Identity, Discrimination, and Struggles with Decisions

This book is about the *White Rose*, an organization that fights against the discrimination of Jewish people, homosexuals, people of differing political discourse, and other discriminated victims of the Nazi regime. It is about choosing speak up against injustice despite the risk of death.

Books about Courage and Survival

Sophie is an incredibly courageous person. She uses her voice to publish leaflets that go against Hitler's ideologies, even if it costs her own life. She does her best to survive, but even at the end of the book, faced with the threat of execution, she still elects to speak up.