

A Reading & Discussion Guide to:

“Silence Not, a Love Story”

A Play by:

Cynthia Cooper

In addition to an audience's primary response to theater as "entertainment," an important reason for experiencing drama is that we are able to clearly see the basic themes of human history unfold through both the heroic and the mundane actions and dialogue of the characters as they go about their everyday lives. When these actions intersect with historic events, we can see the human side of history. In some cases this intersection is joyous. In some cases it can be profoundly disturbing. In either case, the experience enlightens us, deepening our perceptions of ourselves and others. It allows us to understand history in a way that touches our hearts, minds and souls--hopefully allowing us to learn how to cope more effectively with our own reality, and plan more effectively for the future.

Cynthia Cooper's poignant and powerful historical play, "*Silence Not, A Love Story*," is based on the life of heroic German Nazi-Resister, Gisa Peiper. The lessons provided by the main characters, as they try against all odds to live their lives in the midst of The Holocaust, are just as relevant today as they were during the 1930s-1940s. And since human nature hasn't changed throughout history, these profound lessons will still be taught and learned in the future.

As Gisa said,

"I want to convey a basic conviction about human beings: They carry in them the seeds of destruction as well as great love and giving. It will depend on us, each person within each generation at all times, what we help to bring forth. This is an unending task."

The following questions are provided to inspire thought, discussion, and when necessary--action.

Pre-Reading

Based on the true life-story of Gisella (Gisa) Piper and her husband, Paul Konopka, the play, “*Silence Not, a Love Story*,” traces Gisa’s development from being a young, idealistic, middle-class German-Jewish woman, to being a pragmatic, heroic Resister to Nazism. A richer understanding of this play’s lessons will result if the reader/viewer both understands the historic factors which contributed to the rise of Nazism—and recognizes these factors in our world today.

From Biblical heroines, Abolitionists, Suffragettes, Labor Organizers, Spies, Freedom Riders, and a countless every-day women who quietly did the right thing, women’s roles in resisting oppression has been pivotal to the existence of human freedom. Sadly, the heroism of these women has too often gone undocumented and uncelebrated. For the many women who risked their lives to resist Nazism, Cynthia Cooper’s play about Gisa Piper shows how an ordinary woman becomes a heroic Resister simply because she is incapable of *not* resisting evil.

Throughout this play, there are examples of the choices women must make are not just against the obvious enemy, but often also against their own values and the values of their parents, lovers, friends, community, religion, and country. Through the “every-day-ness” of Gisa’s life, the reader is confronted with the question: “*What would you have done?*” And by extension, since genocides exist today, “*What are you doing now?*”

Prologue:

1. What do you think the play's title, "*Silence Not, a Love Story*" might mean?
2. Discuss the historic information provided in the Prologue and tell how it foreshadows the events in the play.
3. What caused profound "shifting of history? What other eras saw history "shift"?"
4. What events in American history parallel Germany in the 1930s and 1940s?
5. What contemporary world events do you think correspond to the events leading up to the development of the Third Reich?
6. What were the motivations for the earliest Resisters to Nazism?
7. How does your personal philosophy reflect these three questions:

What can I know?

What should I/we do?

What may we hope?

CHARACTERS:

8. How do the descriptions of the main characters foreshadow events to come?
9. Describe Gisa and Paul, and tell how their similarities/differences might symbolize specific groups of Germans and Jews during the rise of Nazism.
10. Describe Mendel and Bronia and discuss their feelings toward Gisa.
11. Why is Mendel "embittered and cynical" following World War I?
12. What do you think will be the function of THE WOMAN in the Munich Station?
13. Compare/contrast the "Underground Worker" with "workers" on the Underground Railroad preceding and during the American Civil War.
14. In a play about the most turbulent time in your life, who would be the main characters?

TIME AND PLACE:

15. Why was the era (1929-1938) so "exciting but volatile"? How is this mood reflected in the play's setting and characters?
16. Why might the Munich train station be such an important setting?
17. What would be the setting of the most turbulent time in your life?

ACT I:

Scene 1:

18. Why does Gisa stand behind Adriana?
19. What is the purpose of Gisa's dialogue with Adriana?
20. Why do the soldiers toast, "To a thousand years!"?

Scene 2:

21. In what way might the clock function as a foreshadow?
22. Why does Hilde say, "The person that I'm looking for wouldn't have a degree"?
23. What was important about class distinctions at that time?
24. Why does Gisa say, "Drinking people don't think and thinking people don't drink"? In what way are slogans important to teams, countries, and individuals who are pursuing a goal?
25. What is the purpose of Adriana's cough?
26. What might be the significance of Kathe Kollwitz's art prints?
27. What might be the purpose of the water metaphor?
28. In what way does Gisa show her naïveté about being a Resister?
29. Who is the "right-wing goon" and why is his name not mentioned?
30. Why is Gisa alarmed when Hilde mentions going to church?
31. Why does Gisa want to work in a factory?

A Readers' Guide to: "Silence Not, a Love Story," by Cynthia Cooper p. 5

32. What do you think Gisa means when she says that Rudy is "different"?

Scene 3:

33. What evidence of "good" is there in this scene?

Scene 4:

34. What does the description of Paul tell you about him?

35. What is so important about the *Gestetner*, and how does the making of flyers and a banner compare/contrast with contemporary means of mass communication?

36. What foreshadows the development of a relationship between Gisa and Paul?

37. Why is the name of the newsletter, *The Spark*, so appropriate?

38. Why are Paul and Gisa so impressed by Kollwitz's direction to "Promise me you will remember this also when you are old"?

39. What is important about the newspaper's head-line ?

Scene 5:

40. Who is Frieda, and how do her circumstances reflect the impact of the war on the personal lives of individuals?

Scene 6:

41. How does Gisa's work as a labor organizer show the development of her character?

Scene 7:

42. According to German folklore, *Till Eullenspiegle* was a mythological prankster. He was said to have exposed hypocrisy and to have shown how things can go wrong in communication. Why would Cooper have mentioned him here?

43. How does Gisa's activism affect the lives of the other women workers?

44. Do you agree/disagree with Paul's statement that, "Justice demands action."

A Readers' Guide to: "Silence Not, a Love Story," by Cynthia Cooper p. 6

Scene 9:

45. How do Paul's observations about people "hunting for scapegoats" relate to current events?
46. Why does Gisa feel that she has been a fool?

Scene 14:

47. What does Paul really mean when he says, "I can give you a sturdy frame . . ."

Scene 16:

48. What is the significance of Gisa saying, "A book can't be dangerous."

Scene 17:

49. How do current economic events relate to Mendel's observation, "How much did the crooks in the Reichstag lose when the banks closed last summer?"
50. How does Mendel's simple perspective prevent him from seeing reality, and thus functioning effectively?

Scene 20:

51. What is meant when Gisa says, "We have first-hand accounts from Dessau."?
52. Why did the Nazis close down the Bauhaus School of Design?
53. What is ironic about Gisa saying, "When we go to the Tunnel, we're saying that it's not too late."?
54. Predict what will happen in ACT II.

NOTES

ACT II

Scene 1:

55. What is becoming apparent about THE WOMAN ?

Scene 2:

56. Why do Paul and Gisa meet Franz in the cemetery?

57. Why did Gisa put a pebble on the grave-stone?

58. Who are the "ladies" next door and how do they help the Resisters?

69. What does Franz say that hints at the existence of concentration camps?

Scene 4:

60. The next line of Lasker-Schuler's poem is:

*"It is standing in the dark of the cellar door
Since the world turned savage"*

Why does Adriana remind Gisa to remember this poem?

61. Horst Wessel was a dedicated German Nazi whose song, "Raise High the Flag," also known as "Horst Wessel-Lied" (*The Horst Wessel Song*), became the Nazi anthem. How does including a fragment of this tune provide authenticity to the scene? Why are anthems important to teams/countries/revolutionaries?

62. What is the significance of the note from Rudy?

Scene 7:

63. How does Professor Blumenthal's absence relate to real life events of that time?

Scene 8:

64. What might the recurring "floating" metaphor means?

65. What is the significance of the rocks in Gisa's swim-clothes?

Scene 9:

66. What is the significance of the lunch-pail's false bottom?

Scene 10:

67. Berthold Brecht (1898-1956) was an influential German playwright whose Marxist philosophy was in stark opposition to Nazism, causing him to flee Germany in 1933. He continued to write in exile as a dissident throughout the war years. Why do you think his writings would appeal to Gisa and Paul?
68. Prominent American sports official Avery Brundage, was president of the United States Olympic Committee. A well-known Nazi sympathizer, he refused to boycott the German Olympic Summer Games in 1936 even though German Jews had been excluded. Why would Cooper have mentioned Brundage?

Scene 14:

69. Who was Britain's playboy Monarch, and why does Cooper mention him here?
70. Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) was a renowned Austrian poet. He ended a letter of encouragement to a young writer with the phrase, "Bon courage." How does this quote relate to the scene and to the play as a whole?

Scene 15:

71. Why did *Time Magazine* name Adolf Hitler as 1938's "Man of the Year," and how would this have affected resistance to Nazism?

Scene 17:

72. Why is Gisa swallowing certain "items"?
73. What is the significance of Frieda and the SS man saying that Gisa doesn't eat sausages, wurst or eel?
74. What is ironic about having to "Remember to forget"?
75. Who do you think turned Gisa in to the Gestapo? What are some of the reasons people turned Jews in?

Scene 18:

76. What is the significance of the old man who feeds Gisa and takes the knife away?

Scene 20:

77. In what way do the lines,

"Don't see with your own eyes/the images that will not/go away"

represent a defense mechanism for both the Jews and the Germans?

78. Why did the woman Trustee help Gisa?

79. Why do you think that Gisa threads the needle?

Scene 21:

80. Why *didn't* the Nazis kill Gisa?

Scene 23:

81. What is important about the white gloves?

Scene 24:

82. How does THE WOMAN represent Germans who used whatever resources they had to resist the Nazis?

83. What does Gisa/Adriana want people to remember?

NOTES

FURTHER ANALYSIS:

84. Throughout the play, Cooper creates "*verisimilitude*," a sense of realism of the era, by integrating historic and cultural references including: Anschluss, Kathe Kollwitz, Immanuel Kant, various German political parties, the 1929 Stock Market Crash. What examples of "*verisimilitude*" would you include in your own Memoir?
85. Trace and reflect upon the incidences woven throughout the play that highlight the theme of "remembrance."
86. To what degree did the gender values of pre-WWII Germany influence the development of Gisa Piper? Paul Konopka?
87. Can you trace Gisa's evolution from naïve idealist to practical realist?
88. Discuss the qualities and circumstances that might be inherent to Resisters, and tell which characters manifest these qualities.
89. What qualities and circumstances might influence people *not* to Resist?
90. What is *Passive Resistance* and where is it apparent in the play?
91. What is *Active Resistance* and where is it apparent in the play?
92. In what way might a person's socio-economic status affect his/her mode of resistance?
93. If you were a contemporary of Gisa's, what would you have done?
94. In what ways did the American Jim Crow laws and the American Civil Rights Movement compare/contrast with the existence of and Resistance to Nazism?
95. Where do you think the Nazis got their money? Research the role of American corporations in the development and effectiveness of the Nazis.
96. What is the role of propaganda in both the rise of Fascism and resistance to it?

97. In Shakespeare's Macbeth, Banquo said:

*But 'tis strange;
And oftentimes, to win us to our harm,
The instruments of darkness tell us truths,
Win us with honest trifles, to betray's
In deepest consequence.*

In what ways did the Nazis tell the German truths that were just "honest trifles" and then betray them in "deepest consequence"?

98. Following its defeat in World War I, and the subsequent decrees of the Versailles Treaty, Germany's still young democracy faced a devastating economic crisis along with the proliferation of minor political parties. How would this situation be a nourishing breeding ground for Fascism? Where do these conditions exist today?

99. How does *anti-Nazi Resistance* relate to Edmund Burke's famous quotation:

"All that is necessary for evil to exist is for good men to do nothing"

100. Similar to Adriana and Gisa, if you were able today, to talk to your younger self during a turbulent time in your life, what would you say?

PROJECTS:

1. Create a diorama of your favorite scene in the play.
2. Write a letter to any of the characters providing advice or encouragement.
3. Tweet a series of messages between the characters.
4. Write a poem about any of the characters or themes in the play.
5. Create an artistic rendering of the play's timeline.
6. Illustrate your favorite scene in the play.
7. Write a Third Act.
8. Write a folk-song about Gisa's life or a love song for Gisa and Paul.
9. Improvise short sketches in which actors respond actively or passively to the same prompt.
10. Research psychological aspects of: Altruism, Activism, Resistance to Oppression.

A Readers' Guide to: "Silence Not, a Love Story," by Cynthia Cooper p. 12

11. Research other female heroines and show what qualities they share with Gisa.
12. Gather a group and do a reading of the play.

MORE INFORMATION:

Info Please: *Notable Female Reformers and Activists:*

<http://www.infoplease.com/spot/whmbios3.html#ixzz16om9YZva>

Women in History: *Living Vignettes of Women from the Past:*

<http://www.lkwdpl.org/wihohio/figures.htm>

Wikipedia: *List of Women's Rights Activists:*

Activists: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_women's_rights_activists

Jewish Women's Archive:

<http://jwa.org/exhibits/wwd>

We would like to hear from you!

To make arrangements for a staging of "*Silence Not, A Love Story*," or a reading and book-signing event with playwright, Cynthia Cooper, please contact the publisher, *Gihon River Press*: www.gihonriverpress.com/

Written by Joanne D. Gilbert, M. Ed
Writer, Editor, Personal Historian
info@yourwritetime.com