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# Sophie Scholl: The Final Days: Ebert Versus Rainer In Regard To Sophie's Choice

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*Jess Elder is a junior English major at Cedarville University, minoring in literature, editing & publishing, and Bible. Having written this essay as a freshman, Jess has already seen her writing skills develop and grow. Her future plans include graduate school, with hopes to one day work in the field of publishing or library science, dealing with rare books and manuscripts. From Cincinnati, Ohio, Jess enjoys reading, hiking, and walking her two Scottish Terriers.*

The room is large and square, messy yet not unorganized. A sizable mahogany desk serves as the focal point of the space, fixed in the center of the room. Various papers and documents litter the smooth surface of the desk, illuminated by a small lamp. A pearly white porcelain sink is attached to the back wall. Crowded bookcases stifle the room. Seated in front of the mahogany desk is a young girl in a dull red sweater. Lank brown hair frames her round and pale face, which is set in determined disinterest. Her small white hands are clasped tightly in her lap. Her large, doe-like eyes are fixed on the man standing behind the desk. His hands are splayed menacingly across the surface as he leans toward her, his mustache quivering slightly in frustration. His jaw is set, his brow drawn together in deep thought. His dark, sleek hair is coifed perfectly, not a strand out of place. His uniform is absent of creases. Clearly, this man lives and breathes for order, as much as the girl seated in front of him lives for freedom and other similar ideals. Girl and man are at an impasse. Much of the essence of *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days* is portrayed through the many interrogation scenes between Sophie and Mohr. Many film critics have remarked on this fact, such as Peter Rainer of *The Christian Science Monitor* and the acclaimed Roger Ebert.

While both Ebert and Rainer agree that the interrogation scenes serve as the heart of the film in *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days*, Ebert provides a more in depth review by addressing the theme of good versus evil concerning the law and its execution.

Out of all the aspects of the film, both critics agree that the interrogation scenes between Sophie and Mohr serve as the emotional high point of *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days*. Tense and emotionally charged, these scenes between Sophie and Mohr portray a clash of ideals and worldviews; the Nazi regime versus the conscience-driven mind. Both critics comment on the fact that these scenes were not only some of the best in the film, but historically accurate as well. Rainer states in his review that this accuracy contributed greatly to the film. He writes, “The realization that we are, in many instances, listening in on actual proceedings gives the film an immediacy that no dramatist could hope to match” (Rainer). Rainer believes that the historical aspect adds a concreteness to the film, as well emotional relevance. Ebert follows along the same lines in his review, referencing the historical transcripts released after World War II, indicating that the dialogue in these interrogation scenes is almost word for word (Ebert). By acknowledging the historical elements within the film, both Ebert and Rainer are able to elaborate on the emotional aspects of the film as well.

As such, both critics further examine their own emotional reactions to the film. At one point during the interrogation, Mohr confronts Sophie with damning evidence, such as her suitcase that is exactly the size of the fliers that she is charged with handing out. Ebert describes his own reaction to this line of questioning, writing, “The effect of this scene is so powerful that I leaned forward like a jury member, wanting her to get away with it so I could find her innocent” (Ebert). Ebert’s analogy to a jury member conveys the emotional tone of the film exactly; one is on the edge of his or her seat wishing for Sophie’s innocence when we know she is found guilty. Ebert summarizes Sophie’s whole experience, as well as the viewer’s, saying, “The sentence against her is carried out with startling promptness; because of the movie’s title, we are not surprised, but we are jolted” (Ebert). Due to the emotional overtones of the film, especially the interrogation scenes between Mohr and Sophie, the viewer is left vying for Sophie’s cause knowing full well that it is a lost one. Rainer describes this as “...the emotional heart

of the movie” (Rainer). Both Roger Ebert and Peter Rainer agree that *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days* is an emotionally charged film, fueled by Sophie’s interrogation as well as historical elements. However, this is the only instance in which both critics agree.

Opposed to Rainer, Ebert goes in a different direction with his review, analyzing law and its role in the film. Focusing on how law is utilized, he elaborates on good versus evil. Ebert gathers this as a central message or theme that *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days* depicts, saying, “The police and the court are shown to follow the law, and in the law resides either good or evil, depending on what the law says and how it is enforced. That is why it is crucial that a constitution guarantee rights and freedoms, and why it is dangerous for any government to ignore it. There should be no higher priority” (Ebert). In this instance Ebert is echoing sentiments of Sophie herself, of her fight for freedom of conscience. Ebert elaborates that the Nazis themselves are governed by law. He writes, “But the law moves as the law always does, with no reference to higher justice; even in this Nazi procedure there are carbon copies and paper clips and rubber stamps and a need to see the law followed, as indeed it is. The law underpins evil, but it is observed” (Ebert). Ebert asserts that within the film, law itself is not inherently evil, but the Nazi’s make it so and they are subject to it. The law governs all, good or bad though it may be.

With his review, Rainer chooses to focus on the limiting aspects of the film. More specifically, Rainer would like to know why Sophie becomes an activist with the White Rose and her reasoning behind her steadfast ideals. At the beginning of the film, the viewer witnesses Sophie sing along to the radio with a friend, indicating that she is a normal college student who enjoys having fun. Rainer would like to see more of those traits shine through, believing that it would make Sophie’s ordeal more impactful (Rainer). Rainer takes this further, critiquing the film’s use of the actual transcripts, and wanting to know more of what was going on in Sophie’s mind, saying, “Rothemund’s use of the recorded testimony, while it gives his film a startling veracity, also limits his imagination. It prevents him from delving too deeply into the psychology of these activists” (Rainer). With Sophie knowingly facing death, Rainer is preoccupied with the circumstances that placed her in her current situation. Furthermore, Rainer implies that the filmmakers paint Sophie as a saint-like figure. He writes, “Sophie is such an icon that

at times Rothemund can't resist adding a halo to her crown. When she looks through the bars of her cell, the sunlight gives her face a transcendent glow" (Rainer). With all these critiques taken into account, it is evident that both reviewers left the film with differing mindsets.

With his elaboration on the law and its role, Roger Ebert writes a more comprehensive and in depth review as opposed to Rainer's. Ebert sees a theme in *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days* elaborates on it. Rainer is too concerned with the why and how of the film and its characters, causing him to miss the messages and themes at the heart of the film. In many instances, Sophie does explain why she is an activist. During many of her sessions with Mohr, she talks about the horrors she witnessed as a nurse, and that no matter what, she believes that all human life is sacred. That is why Sophie is willing to go to such lengths for her cause. And despite this, Rainer is still left unsatisfied. He would rather have the film tie up its loose ends and leave the viewer omniscient. Ebert, on the other hand, is able to see a theme in the film and be impacted by it. He does not have to know why or how Sophie believes what she does to be touched by a film. Filmmaking, and often life itself, leaves one in the unknown. As opposed to Rainer, Ebert is willing to be left in the dark and find what light he can.

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