

The “White Friend”: Depictions of Racial Privilege in Young Adult Literature

Novels that educate about racial injustice often use white characters to model how the white audience should empathize with and respond to oppression. This “white friend” served a purpose when racism was extremely explicit; however, today’s racism is less overt, making the trope’s focus on explicit racism unnecessary as well as problematic. There are cultural pressures to create a safe space for the white reader to begin to understand oppression, which results in the use of this “white friend” today. Rebecca Morgan Frank acknowledges this cultural pressure in her article, “Commentary: A Collective Appetite: Reception and the White Gaze from Shange to Sapphire,” when she questions if the works of Shange and Sapphire reveal the control that “cultural gatekeepers, including the media,” have on representation in art as well as questions if this control of representation is used to alleviate “contemporary white guilt” (2). In my paper, I examine the function of the “white friend” in *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas. I discuss the difference between implicit and explicit racism; show how the “white friend” offers a simplified version of biases and their role in institutionalized racism; and emphasize that the use of the “white friend” creates false empathy and complacency in white readers.