

Terrible Things An Allegory Of The Holocaust By Eve Bunting

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INTRODUCTION: UNDERSTANDING "TERRIBLE THINGS AN ALLEGORY OF THE HOLOCAUST"

Few topics in history are as challenging to introduce to young readers as the Holocaust. The sheer scale of cruelty, the systematic dehumanization, and the incomprehensible loss of life demand a careful, thoughtful approach. Eve Bunting’s picture book, *Terrible Things: An Allegory of the Holocaust*, tackles this monumental challenge with remarkable sensitivity and profound simplicity. Through the lens of a forest community of animals, Bunting crafts a narrative that makes the abstract horror of the Holocaust accessible without minimizing its tragedy. The story of the “Terrible Things” coming to take away one creature after another serves as a stark, unforgettable warning about the dangers of indifference, complicity, and the failure to speak out. This article explores the layers of meaning within **Terrible Things An Allegory Of The Holocaust**, examining its allegorical power, its educational value, and the timeless relevance of its message.

THE STORY BEHIND THE ALLEGORY

Published in 1980, *Terrible Things* is not a direct retelling of historical events but a metaphorical journey. In a peaceful clearing, a diverse group of animals—rabbits, squirrels, frogs, birds, and porcupines—live together in harmony. One day, a mysterious, shadowy force called the “Terrible Things” arrives. They announce that they are taking all creatures with feathers, and the other animals, relieved they are not targeted, do nothing. Next, the Terrible Things return for the creatures with fur, and again the remaining animals stay silent. One by one, groups are singled out and taken away based on arbitrary characteristics. Finally, only the rabbits are left, and the Terrible Things come for them, too. It is only then that one rabbit, Little Rabbit, realizes the terrible mistake: no one spoke up, and now it is too late.

This simple yet devastating plot mirrors the progression of Nazi persecution, from the initial targeting of specific groups (Jews, Romani, disabled individuals, political dissidents) to the gradual expansion of oppression until no one was left to protect the vulnerable. Bunting’s choice to leave the “Terrible Things” unnamed and featureless emphasizes the faceless nature of prejudice and bureaucratic evil. The allegory strips away historical specifics, allowing readers to focus on the universal dynamics of scapegoating, fear, and moral failure.

THE POWER OF ALLEGORICAL STORYTELLING IN HOLOCAUST EDUCATION

Why an Allegory Works for Young Audiences

Teaching the Holocaust to elementary and middle school children is fraught with ethical and emotional pitfalls. Graphic descriptions of genocide can traumatize, while overly sanitized accounts may fail to convey the horror. Eve Bunting’s allegory strikes a delicate balance. By replacing human victims with forest animals, she creates emotional distance that allows children to process the moral lessons without being overwhelmed by historical trauma. The animal characters are relatable—innocent, vulnerable, and governed by instinct. Their failure to act is not presented as monstrous but as a deeply human (or animal) flaw: the tendency to prioritize personal safety over collective responsibility.

Moreover, the allegory invites readers to ask: “What would I have done?” This question is at the heart of Holocaust education. **Terrible Things An Allegory Of The Holocaust** transforms a historical event into a timeless moral fable, applicable not only to Nazi Germany but to any situation where prejudice and groupthink are allowed to flourish.

Symbolism and Deeper Meanings

The story’s symbols are carefully chosen. The “Terrible Things” represent any authoritarian regime, mob mentality, or system that dehumanizes others. The forest is a world that could be our own—a community that values peace until fear disrupts it. Each round of removals corresponds to a stage of Nazi policy:

- **First removal (creatures with feathers):** Mirroring the early targeting of politically inconvenient groups, such as communists or the disabled, which many Germans accepted because they themselves were not affected.
- **Second removal (creatures with fur):** Reflecting the escalation against Jews, Romani, and others, as the regime expanded its victim list.
- **Third removal (creatures that swim):** Symbolizing the rounding up of more marginal groups, including homosexuals and Jehovah’s Witnesses.
- **Final removal (rabbits):** The moment when no one is left to speak for the last minority, echoing the tragic final phase of the Holocaust.

Little Rabbit’s eventual cry—“Why did no one help us?”—resonates with the famous quote often

attributed to Martin Niemöller about the Nazis coming for the socialists, trade unionists, Jews, and then no one was left to speak for him. Bunting’s allegory makes this lesson visceral and personal for young readers.

THE EDUCATIONAL FRAMEWORK: USING "TERRIBLE THINGS" IN THE CLASSROOM

Building Empathy and Critical Thinking

Teachers who incorporate *Terrible Things* into their curriculum often pair it with age-appropriate background on the Holocaust for older students. The book serves as a springboard for discussions on:

- **Bystander behavior** – Why do people remain silent when they see injustice?
- **Scapegoating** – How are groups blamed for societal problems?
- **Prejudice and discrimination** – What characteristics are used to divide people?
- **Courage and responsibility** – What does it mean to be an upstander?

Teachers often ask students to rewrite the ending, imagining what different choices the animals could have made. This exercise develops empathy and a sense of agency. The allegory also works well in social studies, language arts, and even ethics classes, making it a versatile tool.

Age Appropriateness and Sensitivity

Recommended for grades 2 through 5, *Terrible Things* avoids explicit violence. The phrase “taken away” is euphemistic but powerful. However, educators must be prepared for emotional reactions, especially from children who may have personal experiences with bullying or exclusion. The story’s directness can trigger discomfort, which is intentional—the goal is to provoke reflection, not merely entertainment. Many guides recommend teaching this book alongside non-fiction resources, such as picture books about Anne Frank or the Holocaust for older elementary students.

One criticism of *Terrible Things* is that it simplifies historical causality. Some educators argue that it risks implying that only innocent animals are victims, which could lead to a simplistic “good vs. evil” narrative. Yet Bunting’s allegory is not meant to replace historical study but to introduce its moral core. For this reason, **Terrible Things An Allegory Of The Holocaust** is most effective when used as part of a broader unit that includes historical context, personal narratives, and discussions of contemporary prejudice.

COMPARING THE ALLEGORY TO OTHER HOLOCAUST LITERATURE FOR CHILDREN

Several other notable works tackle the Holocaust for young readers, including Roberto Innocenti’s *Rose Blanche*, Lois Lowry’s *Number the Stars*, and Patricia Polacco’s *The Butterfly*. What sets Bunting’s work apart is its intentional abstraction. While *Number the Stars* is rooted in specific historical events in Denmark, *Terrible Things* removes all historical markers, making it a universal

parable. This universality is both its strength and a limitation. It allows the story to be applied to any genocide—the Armenian Genocide, the Rwandan Genocide, the Holocaust of Native Americans—yet some critics argue it dilutes the unique horror of the Shoah.

Nevertheless, for very young children, the allegory is often the only safe entry point. It plants the seed that evil can happen when good people do nothing, a lesson that can be deepened as the child matures. The book’s illustrations, by Stephen Gammell, are stark and haunting—black-and-white drawings that emphasize the shadowy, threatening nature of the Terrible Things. The visual absence of color mirrors the moral darkness of the story.

THEMES THAT RESONATE TODAY

The relevance of **Terrible Things An Allegory Of The Holocaust** extends far beyond its original publication. In an age of rising nationalism, online echo chambers, and scapegoating of immigrants and minorities, the story’s central warning is more urgent than ever. The animals do not set out to be evil; they are simply afraid. They rationalize their inaction: “I’m not a creature with feathers, so it’s not my problem.” That rationalization is the seed of complicity.

Modern readers can see parallels in the rhetoric that targets marginalized groups—whether based on race, religion, sexual orientation, or political opinion. The story asks us to examine our own responses when we witness exclusion or hatred in our communities, schools, or workplaces. Will we be the rabbit who speaks up too late, or will we be the one who says, “No, you cannot take my neighbor, because we are all part of this forest”?

Furthermore, the allegory teaches that the failure to act harms the entire community. After each removal, the forest becomes quieter, emptier, and less vibrant. The loss of diversity is a communal loss. This lesson is especially valuable for children learning about social justice: that protecting others is an act of self-preservation as well as morality.

RECEPTION AND CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

Since its release, *Terrible Things* has been widely praised by librarians, educators, and Holocaust scholars for its straightforward approach to a difficult topic. However, it has also faced criticism. Some argue that the allegory risked oversimplification and could inadvertently teach children that victimization is passive—Little Rabbit only realizes the problem when it is too late. Others point out that the story does not show any animals resisting or helping, which might leave children feeling hopeless. In response, many educators pair the story with examples of resistance during the Holocaust, such as the Danish rescue of Jews or the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, to provide a counter-narrative of courage.

Another critical perspective concerns the depiction of the “Terrible Things” as an external force. The Nazis were not faceless monsters but human beings who made choices. Some argue that the allegory might lead children to view evil as a mysterious, unstoppable force rather than the result of ordinary people committing terrible acts. Nevertheless, for the intended age group, the allegorical darkness serves as a powerful first step toward nuanced understanding.

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS FOR PARENTS AND EDUCATORS

If you are considering sharing *Terrible Things* with a child or student, here are some best practices:

- **Pre-read the book** to assess whether it suits the child’s maturity level.
- **Discuss while reading** – Pause after each group is taken and ask: “How do you think the other animals feel? Why are they not helping?”
- **Connect to history** – For older elementary students, introduce basic facts about the Holocaust so the allegory has context.
- **Focus on action** – Emphasize that Little Rabbit’s regret is a call to action, not a lesson in despair. Talk about ways to speak up against injustice today.
- **Incorporate counter-examples** – Share true stories of people who helped during the Holocaust, such as Oskar Schindler, Irena Sendler, or ordinary families who hid neighbors.

- **Use writing prompts** – Ask children to write a new ending where one animal speaks up, or to create a sequel about rebuilding the forest community.

CONCLUSION: THE ENDURING LESSON OF "TERRIBLE THINGS"

Eve Bunting’s *Terrible Things: An Allegory of the Holocaust* remains a seminal work in children’s literature precisely because it does not shy away from the most disturbing human truth: that ordinary people can become accomplices to atrocity through silence. The story of Little Rabbit and his doomed forest companions is a cautionary tale that transcends its historical context, speaking directly to the moral choices we make every day. By turning the Holocaust into a simple but devastating fable, Bunting ensures that even the youngest readers can grasp the importance of standing up, speaking out, and refusing to let the “Terrible Things” win. In a world still too full of persecution and indifference, **Terrible Things An Allegory Of**