

Using animals to divide: illustrated allegory in maus and terrible things



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Today, most Americans can only imagine what the horrors of the Holocaust must have been like - and, to be frank, they are probably very glad that they have no personal experiences to draw on. However, the Holocaust, and other catastrophic events in history, must be remembered. Even as Americans who live nowhere near the places that were ravaged by destruction and genocide, we must attempt to understand the Holocaust, because even events as horrific as the genocide of Jews in Europe are a part of history - and history tends to repeat itself. Many authors of Holocaust literature seem to believe that awareness equals prevention. Both words and images are a vital component of remembrance, as exemplified by allegorical Holocaust literature such as that created by authors Art Spiegelman and Eve Bunting. Art Spiegelman, in his *Maus* books, and Eve Bunting, author of the children's book *Terrible Things: An Allegory of the Holocaust*, show us that words and images are both essential in representations of the Holocaust. The use of an allegory in which animals symbolize people, when paired with careful style and pattern choices for illustrations, is highly effective in conveying the message that racism and division can lead, quite simply, to "terrible things". *Maus* is an unusual account of the Holocaust - it is strikingly different from most Holocaust literature targeted at adults, yet Spiegelman's work has attracted an amazing number of readers of all ages. In fact, *Maus* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1992, and has proven to be a staple in many college classrooms. In writing and illustrating *Maus*, Art Spiegelman took on the difficult task of accurately representing his father's story, as well as depicting the things that Vladek told him in a way that the public could understand and appreciate. Interestingly, he chose to represent people in *Maus* as animals, with each race portrayed as a different animal. In this <https://assignbuster.com/using-animals-to-divide-illustrated-allegory-in-maus-and-terrible-things/>

allegory, the Jews are depicted as mice, the Germans are cats, the Poles are pigs, and when Americans are introduced in Maus II, they are dogs. Besides creating an obvious division between some of the key groups in the Holocaust, readers can read more deeply into Spiegelman's choice of animal for each race. The cat and mouse idea behind the portrayal of the Germans and the Jews is a fairly obvious one. Spiegelman's choice to draw the Poles as pigs, however, could be taken in several ways: perhaps they are depicted as pigs because they stand by and do nothing while the Jews are taken away, or perhaps the pig symbolizes the Poles' greed and selfishness when they took over Jewish homes and businesses after the Jews were evacuated from Polish towns. Either way, Spiegelman's depiction of these four races pushes readers to recognize the racial differences, hatred, and segregation that occurred during the Holocaust, and his allegory proves to be a poignant one. Throughout Maus and Maus II, Spiegelman uses metaphors to spotlight the division between races in Europe at the time of the Holocaust. His two volumes follow Vladek's story from a time when he was a normal citizen of Poland, to a time when Jews, Poles, and Germans each had their distinctive places in society, and finally to a time when Jews were slaughtered simply for the fact that they were Jewish. Spiegelman's depiction of Jews as mice helps readers who may know little about such extreme racism to understand that the differences in appearance, dialect, and the like were the primary signs that the Nazis used to direct their hatred. In the Holocaust all of the European races were human; similarly, in Maus all of the characters are animals, yet it is the subtle differences between them that cause the death of millions. When Vladek must take his wife Anja to the sanitarium,

Speigelman illustrates a perfect world in which all animals can live in
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harmony. Though it is ironic that everyone is only at peace when they are in a sanitarium, this is the only time in his two volumes that Spiegelman brings all the different kinds of animals together. Here, there are mice, pigs, cats, and dogs, as well as rabbits, horses, giraffes, goats, and frogs. Once they leave the sanitarium and enter the “real” world again, however, racism rears its head and they separate once again. It is interesting that Spiegelman chooses to send the message that only in a completely contrived, unnatural situation such as a “health resort” can different races be truly at peace, but nonetheless, this adds to the strength of his allegory. Bunting’s *Terrible Things* also uses animals to symbolize groups that were persecuted during the Holocaust. She and illustrator Stephen Gammell create a forest filled with rabbits, squirrels, fish, birds, frogs, and porcupines. All of the animals live together peacefully until the Terrible Things come to the forest and wreak havoc on nature’s harmony. The Terrible Things are not represented as animals, as the Nazis are in *Maus*, but rather as ethereal, haunting shadows that blot out the sun. The first time the Terrible Things come to visit, they say, “We have come for every creature with feathers on its back.” All of the animals of the forest say, “We don’t have feathers” – except, of course, for the birds, who are then taken away. Upon each return, the Terrible Things take away another type of animal, while the ones who do not meet the criteria look the other way, glad that they are able to stay in the clearing. The Terrible Things continue to come back, however, until they have taken away all the animals except for the white rabbits. Little Rabbit is afraid and wants to move, but Big Rabbit counters, “Why should we move? This has always been our home. And the Terrible Things won’t come back. We are the White Rabbits. It couldn’t happen to us.” Then, of course, it does: the white

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rabbits are taken away, all except for Little Rabbit who is small enough to hide in the rocks. In the end, Little Rabbit realizes that, “ If only we creatures had stuck together, it could have been different.” Speigelman’s metaphor for racism is echoed in *Terrible Things*, and here it is especially effective in teaching young children that no matter how different people are, bad things can happen to anyone. The book’s message is that it is important to stick together and try to help each other rather than ignore each others’ suffering. *Terrible Things* differs from *Maus*, however, in that each race is not associated with a specific animal. Also, the Nazis, or the Terrible Things, are not represented as animals, but rather as ominous clouds lurking over the forest. *Terrible Things* is more abstract than *Maus*, in that the animals do not represent particular groups (most likely because such references would most likely be lost on children, the intended audience); here, the allegory here focuses on obvious differences that children can see (feathers, color, ability to swim, etc.). Each group of forest animals has distinct differences, and each time the Terrible Things come to take some of them away, the animals that remain are very glad that it is not their turn. Though this story may be disturbing to younger children, it is effective at alerting readers that differences between people should not cause such division that they allow terrible things to happen. As Bunting states as a sort of preface to *Terrible Things*, “ In Europe, during World War II, many people looked the other way while terrible things happened. They pretended not to know that their neighbors were being taken away and locked in concentration camps. They pretended not to hear their cries for help. The Nazis killed millions of Jews and others in the Holocaust. If everyone had stood together at the first sign of evil, would this have happened?” Bunting invites children and adults alike <https://assignbuster.com/using-animals-to-divide-illustrated-allegory-in-maus-and-terrible-things/>

to think about the consequences of their own actions and prejudices, and Gammell's illustrations throughout *Terrible Things* inspire the same discomfort and sadness in children that Spiegelman's images of hatred and death in *Maus* inspire in adults. So, image paired with word, we see here, can make a big impact. Images can communicate things that even words cannot, and are especially relevant in the context of Holocaust literature. In representing the Holocaust through images, it is important to consider factors such as style, color, and placement. As an illustrator one must consider the effect that the illustrations will have on the viewer, and both Spiegelman and Gammell made choices that enhance comprehension in the reader and convey a clear message. Both illustrators portray their subjects in simple black and white, and both make the pictures take over each page in such a way that they become the main focus of the books. The use of black and white is convincing for depictions of the Holocaust, even when animals are the subject, because any real photographs that readers may have seen from the era would have been black and white. Black and white is often used to convey the gravity of a situation, as well, and using these shades to illustrate *Maus* and *Terrible Things* allows Spiegelman and Gammell to create serious, somber messages about the possible consequences of hatred. Also, images take center stage in these books presumably because the story behind Holocaust is really about the people, about the victims, and about what happened to them, rather than merely an account of the number of dead bodies or a history of how Hitler came to acquire such power. With all their similarities, however, there are some marked differences between the two illustrators' styles. While Spiegelman uses thick black lines and a comic book format, Gammell uses pencil drawings and a more realistic style. Both

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illustrators' images are full of impact, though, because the pictures command such a power and presence on the page. The lack of color draws the reader to the image and begs them to analyze what they are seeing. For example, Gammell includes an image of a frightened squirrel who is about to be captured by the Terrible Things. Children reading this book will immediately notice the squirrel's expression of fear because Gammell places the detailed creature so carefully on the page. In *Maus II*, likewise, Spiegelman captures the expressions of burning bodies in the gas chambers of Auschwitz, and his use of bold lines captivates, horrifies, and consumes the reader. Also, in each book, the animal allegory adds to the impact of the pictures because for very young children who may not be able to handle images of real bodies, depictions of animals can serve as a gateway to understanding the true story of the Holocaust. Seeing these illustrations may be quite upsetting to children, and when they learn later that these things happened to humans, they will be able to assimilate the feelings they had when reading *Terrible Things* into what they are learning about real victims. Also, the allegory works to impact adult readers of *Maus* when they see Spiegelman's drawings because the characters do clearly represent actual humans. In the end, *Maus* and *Terrible Things* leave readers feeling something powerful. Whether it is sadness, shock, or a determination to never again ignore the pain of others, Spiegelman and Bunting have both created very poignant works. Using both words and images, these authors have done something that many Holocaust writers have not - they have connected the words that many have heard about the Holocaust with images that make sense to their intended audience.