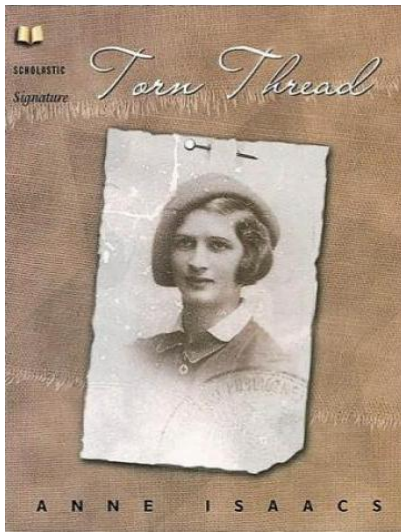


Torn Thread - Teacher Activities



The Story

"Night was coming. Wild geese called as they flew toward the mountains. Eva sat cross-legged by the attic window, playing chess with herself." These words begin the riveting account of 12-year-old Eva and her sister, Rachel, who are torn from their father in the Jewish ghetto of Bedzin, Poland, then sent as slave laborers to work in a Nazi camp in Parschnitz, Czechoslovakia. In the labor camp, Eva is forced to spin thread on dangerous machines to make blankets and uniforms for the German army. As she struggles amid ever-worsening dangers to save her life and that of her sick sister, Eva's world tears apart like the weak threads on her spinning machine. Amidst this setting of inhumanity and chaos, the two teenagers strive to create home and family -- sharing not only crusts of bread, but precious moments of love and laughter. Eva's courage and resourcefulness prevail, and the Allied armies arrive at last to free the prisoners. But even then, as throughout this unforgettable story, heartbreak and hope are spun into a single strand. As the sisters leave the camp and begin the journey back to Poland, they wonder what awaits them at home, and who of their family has survived."

Torn Thread - Teacher Activities

Understanding the book: Theme

Torn Thread is filled with universal themes that convey truths all readers can understand and relate to. How does each of these passages from *Torn Thread* point out a theme of the story?

1. Papa's advice, *One more hour. . . Try to stay alive for one more hour. . .* first appears on page 20 and runs through the book like the refrain of a song. What does this statement imply about the preciousness of life? In what other passages does the book convey a sense of life's beauty and goodness, even in dark hours, which makes it worth fighting for?
2. Eva recalls Papa's statement that "Either we will find a path around or God will teach us how to fly." (page 43) Throughout the book there is a shifting balance between Eva's conviction that outside powers (God, the Nazis) control her fate, and her sense of personal responsibility to save herself and Rachel (see pages 43, 44, 110). This balance finds its final expression in the last chapters, where Eva works hard and takes risks to save her sick sister, and at the same time prays to God to save Rachel.

The book does not offer an easy resolution to the question of who is responsible for one's fate, the individual or some larger, outside power. What do you think? Develop a debate or assign an essay on the question of free will (Eva's personal responsibility) versus destiny in *Torn Thread*.

3. The struggle to retain inner freedom, while outwardly a slave, is a major theme of *Torn Thread*. Different characters deal with this problem in different ways. On page 61 Hannah says, "I know what you're thinking. . . that they can't take your pride, or your faith, or any of what's inside you. . . Then one morning--after you've been here for a year or two, you'll see -- you'll wake up and realize all of that's gone. . . Only by then you won't care any more." Hannah seems to have given up trying to hold onto the freedom of spirit she once had. In this sense she has given the Nazis all her being, body and mind. Does Hannah's prediction prove true for Eva, or are there ways in which Eva remains 'free' inside? What about other main characters?

Torn Thread - Teacher Activities

Imagery (figures of speech) in Torn Thread

Throughout the book are poetic images -- similes, metaphors and symbols -- which convey moods, themes, and character linguistically.

Start a discussion by explaining the difference between simile (comparison using words such as 'like' or 'as'--eg. "my love is like a rose"), metaphor (comparison in which two unrelated things are connected--eg. "my love is a rose") and symbol (something used to represent something else by association, often an object representing a theme or concept--eg. "the rose" represents the concept of love). In a long literary work such as a novel, each simile or metaphor is generally used only once, while symbols are often repeated throughout the text.

1. Simile

Examine the description of sunset (on page 101), which Eva observes just after learning that Papa has probably died: "In the west the clouds were streaked with crimson, as if heaven were bleeding." How does this simile convey Eva's emotions?

2. Metaphor

Examine the phrase 'rough-handed wind' on page 150: "Tears of frustration ran down her cheeks, where the rough-handed wind dried them." What is the wind being compared to here? How is this especially poignant in a scene where Eva is without anyone to comfort her?

3. Symbol

Two symbols which are used repeatedly in Torn Thread are the image of thread, used to represent the fragile lives of the Jews, and stars, to represent hope, and the beauty and worth of life. Have the students study the ways in which these two symbols are used, and how their meaning and mood shifts subtly as they are used in different contexts.

Torn Thread - Teacher Activities

Thread is used symbolically pages 11, 12, and 124, to name only a few. Note also that hair is used interchangeably with thread imagery in many places. On page 125 Eva's hair is torn just as the weak threads were torn on the page before.

Stars and night-sky symbols are found on pages 3, 12, 13, 19, 101, 116, and 180.

Setting

In a novel, the presentation of setting often provides a key to understanding the inner state of a character. How is this true in *Torn Thread*? Consider these examples:

On page 26, while Eva walks to the camp for the first time, details in the setting depict Eva's fear of what will greet her in the camp. How do the dust, the heat, and the chimneys towering 'like raised fists' show her state of mind?

On page 92 the depiction of a blizzard -- which "roared down from the mountains like a swarm of fighter planes bent on wiping out any trace of life" -- foreshadows the impending bad news about Papa. How is this war image ironic in light of Eva's prayers for Allied troops to rescue them?

On page 116 a storm is used again to convey the menace of impending bad news, Fraulein Kirschlag's announcement of the end of train service. In this case even the stars are menacing, glittering like "fragments of broken glass." How is this image reminiscent of the real broken glass of *Kristallnacht*, a famous 1938 Nazi attack on Jewish businesses?

How might these two storm images (above) echo the inner turmoil of fear and anxiety, grief and despair that Eva feels?

Compare the way another author uses elements of setting to convey the inner life of the main character. A good example is *Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain, where storms are used repeatedly to mirror the inner turmoil of the main character, Huck.

Torn Thread - Teacher Activities

Summer and Winter Marches

An especially good comparison of weather as an element in setting is found in two descriptions of forced marches, one in summer (page 28) and one in winter (page 95-96). What similarities/differences do you see in these two passages? The first march takes place early on, before Eva even arrives at the camp; while the second takes place much later in the story. What subtle changes in diction and tone convey the prolonged period of suffering which has taken place prior to the second march? How has Eva's response to suffering changed from the first to second march?

Foreshadowing

A number of subtle hints are placed in the text to foreshadow Eva's eventual, and almost fatal, accident with her machine. Have your students locate and study the growing accumulation of warning-signs hidden in the text:

1. On page 58 Hannah warns, "Watch out!" and on page 59, when a rag gets caught in the machine, the motor starts "screeching like a person in pain"
2. On page 56 Hannah warns Eva that her "hair could get caught in the machines" if she doesn't cover it completely, but on page 60-61 Eva styles her hair in the latest fashion, leaving rolls of hair exposed above her forehead.
3. There is danger inherent throughout the hair-washing scene, especially on pages 78-82, when Rachel has to be carried to the infirmary as a result, exposing both girls to punishment by Frau Hawlik.
4. (page 99) Eva loses her focus while working on her machine, and the bobbins stop turning as threads break. A guard finds her and nearly beats her.

Torn Thread - Teacher Activities

5. On page 123, just before the final scene of getting her hair caught, Eva's tiredness and lack of concentration predict doom, while on page 124 the broken threads symbolize --and cause -- the coming disaster.

A good question raised by this examination might be: why would Eva, so careful and active for her safety and that of her sister, endanger herself by leaving her hair exposed? (see character section, below, for more on this)

Humor

Uncle Nuchem, Eva, Kayla stand out as having a sense of humor even in the midst of painful circumstances. What does that tell the reader about their characters?

Examine the examples of humor on pages 13, 18, 25, 37, and 96. Isaacs once said that "Humor is courage". How is that statement illustrated in Torn Thread?

Character

In Torn Thread, character is revealed slowly, with new aspects of personality coming out as the story progresses. From the beginning Eva is shown as responsible and caring for Rachel. On page 43-44 Eva is preoccupied with care for her sister, almost putting it ahead of herself. and on page 68 Eva seems much the older, more responsible sister, knitting and washing clothes while Rachel naps. A close reading of these passages shows new aspects of Eva in each passage. Compare them and ask students to find subtle 'revelations'.

Have students discuss Eva and Rachel's similarities and differences. Do you think either of them could have survived in the camp without the other? Why or why not? On page 133-134 Rachel makes Eva promise allow their relationship to change after the war, to let Rachel "do my share in everything"

Torn Thread - Teacher Activities

and "let me take care of you, too". Do you think this will happen? Why does Rachel propose making this change after the war, not right away?

Torn Thread doesn't tell us what happens to all the characters at the end. What do you think might have happened to Herr Schmidt? Frau Hawlik? Bella? Kayla? Dora? If they were still alive, what kind of lives might they be leading now?

On page 109 Eva lists four qualities, when she wonders what God will write beside her name in the Book of Life: stubborn, proud, hardworking, and brave. How well do you think these qualities summarize her character? What did she leave out? Does Eva have any faults? Does vanity about her appearance (leaving her hair out of her kerchief) get her into trouble and almost cost her her life? Or is it her lack of vanity which gets her into trouble (not bothering to tidy her hair p. 124)? Or is it a kind of rebellion against the Nazis, a proud defiance, which leads Eva to keep part of her hair uncovered (page 61)? The story is ambiguous, so it is left up to each reader to interpret.

Student Activities

1. Compare three 'reunion' scenes in *Torn Thread*: (1) when Eva and Rachel meet at the camp (page 31-32); (2) after witnessing the death march, when Eva and Rachel share secrets and become closer (page 133-134); and (3) when Rachel recovers from typhus (page 180-181). How are the scenes different, how the same? What other reunion between sisters brings about the second 'reunion'? In what way could each scene be described as 'renewed life after a brush with death'?
2. Write a journal entry from the point of view of one of the main characters in the book.
3. Imagine you are Eva and have commanded to write Papa after your arrival at the camp in Parschnitz. You know that Frau Hawlik will read and 'censor' your letter. What do you say? Imagine you are Papa in the ghetto, writing to your daughters in the camp. Write a letter or series of letters from Eva to Papa, and write Papa's replies to Eva.

Torn Thread - Teacher Activities

4. From your own life, write a true account of a time when you had a close call or an actual accident. Were there warnings? Did you heed them? How could your story have ended differently if you had or hadn't heeded them?

5. Interview an older member of your family. Ask them to tell you an important chapter in their life. Then set it down in writing and share it with the class.

6. In Nazi labor camps such as Parschnitz the girls often started underground, secret newspapers written on scraps of paper they stole from the factories where they worked. In the newspapers they wrote stories, poems, song lyrics, and 'news' of the camp. They might have included a carefully coded satire of the Nazi soldiers or guards, or a mean 'elder' such as Bella. These newspapers were secretly circulated in the camp, providing an outlet for humor and creativity, and a temporary sense of freedom to both the creators and readers. As a class, plan and write a secret camp newspaper, the "Parschnitz Press". Include articles or poems by some of the camp inmates -- either from the book's characters, or from your imagination.

7. Czech author Franz Kafka once said: "You can hold back from the suffering of the world; you have free permission to do so and it is in accordance with your nature, but perhaps this very holding back is the one suffering you could have avoided." What do you think Kafka meant by this? How are we all 'citizens of the world', responsible for the sufferings of others? How does it relieve our suffering when we try to help others?

As a class, study a modern, ongoing story of racial persecution or genocide, anywhere in the world. Find ways to get involved, through study, teaching others, or by raising funds to provide relief to the needy.

Torn Thread - Teacher Activities

Religious Issues

(Note: recommended for use in Jewish or religious educational settings)

Is God a character in the story? What kind of role does God play? Eva asks God for help and reassurance, directly and indirectly. In your opinion, does God 'reply' by saving them, as Eva credits God with doing (pages 180-181)?

In Book I Papa is the authority figure who Eva turns to (in her mind) when she is unsure and frightened. It is Papa's words which give her strength in times of extreme peril. But at the end of Book I Eva finds out that Papa may be dead, and from then on she turns mainly to God for reassurance and help. Chapter 13, pages 105-115, marks this shift dramatically, as Eva finds the prayers (psalms) which both give voice to her suffering and doubt, and at the same time, offer reassurance that "help is on the way".(page 111) In fact her newly-strengthened faith gets a boost in the form of hopeful news about an early Allied victory (page 113), and Eva immediately credits God, rather than the efforts of the armies, for her approaching freedom.

Eva recalls Papa's statement that "Either we will find a path around or God will teach us how to fly." (page 43) At first Eva decides that she cannot trust her fate to God alone, and that she will have to search for a 'path around', a way to keep herself and Rachel alive, on her own (page 44). "It seemed to her that God had not heard the prayers of the Jews for a long time." (page 44) But then, in chapter 12, she begins to turn to God for help, and finds in the psalms the words which link her to God, to God's rescuing and healing power. (page 110)

Many Jews who went through the Holocaust lost their faith in God because of their experiences. Eva's faith is questioned and shaken at times, but she seems to believe more strongly in God the harder things get. What does it say about her character that she never loses her faith?

Eva's decision to fast on Yom Kippur is almost a 'deal' with God. It could be restated as follows, taking the voice of Eva's secret thoughts: *If I make it through the fast, in honor of God, then maybe God will offer the same measure of strength (that I have shown) to Papa, to help him survive.* This kind of 'deal-making' with God is often seen in people who are facing an extreme, life-threatening

Torn Thread - Teacher Activities

emergency. It may seem ridiculous on the surface, to those who are not facing the emergency, but it is in deadly earnest to those who are. To help students understand the psychology behind such a 'deal', assign them the following written or oral assignment:

You are the only survivor on a life raft. Land is within reach, if the winds choose to carry you there, but you have no way to steer or propel the raft on your own. What kind of deal would you offer, and to who, in return for a helping wind and calm seas to carry you to safety?

8. Stage a mock debate about whether or not to fast on Yom Kippur. Each student can assume the character of one of the girls in the story, or make up her/his own personal response. What would you do?