

Anthropomorphism and race in maus



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In *Maus*, Art Spiegelman produces what can be seen as a reaction to the Holocaust and its complicated aftermath. It is a graphic representation of the various horrors of the Holocaust and he chooses to make his characters anthropomorphic. One may argue that in an individual story that is as hard hitting as *Vladek's*, the use of the same animal caricature-like heads to denote various races serves to trivialize the story. However, Spiegelman's use of anthropomorphic characters serves a number of important purposes that, it may be argued, justify his technique and counterbalance the negative viewpoints that can be expressed against it. It must be kept in mind that Spiegelman is not simply dealing with the Holocaust in an academic, somewhat detached and objective manner. He is dealing with the very personal reality of the Holocaust survival story of his father and mother and simultaneously his own often ambivalent feelings about them. Everything about his life, it may be argued, has in some way been essentially touched by the Holocaust because his parents both went through it. Thus, Spiegelman is bound to feel very strongly about the subject matter involved. In the "Prisoner on the Hell Planet" we see that these strong feelings are portrayed in a very hard hitting and disturbing manner. This is something that Spiegelman has worked on earlier to express his feelings about his mother's death, and one gets the feeling that this technique has not been particularly successful as far as Spiegelman is concerned. In using the animal faces, he is removing the starkness of the horror, and provides both himself and the readers with a space to explore the story without getting too emotionally disturbed. For people who have not survived the Holocaust, it is difficult to imagine the kind of horrors that were inflicted upon people in the concentration camps, so Spiegelman has made the story telling possible by

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creating a detachment and a humor to a very dark and tragic incident. There are also several other important reasons why Spiegelman's technique is justified. In giving the Jews mice heads, he is making a sarcastic statement about the treatment of the Jews as vermin by the Nazis. It also refers to the resilience of mice as a whole, which can be seen as a veiled compliment to the community for surviving the Holocaust. It can be argued that instead of enforcing racial stereotypes, Spiegelman actually satirizes them and ultimately influences the readers to question them. In deliberately playing up racial stereotypes, for example in the portrayal of the French as frogs, he is actually pointing out the futility and hollowness of these stereotypes. In making his protagonists look all the same, Spiegelman is communicating to the audience that although this particular survivor's story is of Vladek's, there are many more similar stories of Holocaust victims and survivors that have never been told. Thus, even as he highlights Vladek and Anja's individual plight, he also pays homage to the millions whose stories he cannot possibly tell individually. Hence, while it is a personal memoir, it becomes at the same time removed from its subject and manages to encompass the enormity of the Holocaust. Oftentimes in Maus the idea of racial identity becomes a confusing one. This is because while at one level race and ethnicity seems to be so deeply rooted that one cannot escape it without escaping the book altogether, at another level it seems like it is more subjective. For example, the various identities ascribed to the different races never change in the novel. All the Germans are cats, the Poles are pigs, and so on. From this standpoint there is no escaping the racial identity of every character in the novel. On the other hand, certain characters are more flexible than that and can be less easily categorized. Art himself is an

excellent example of this ambiguity. Although he has a European Jewish heritage, he identifies himself as an American. However, he acknowledges the effect of his racial heritage on his present personality. Here, his race is mutable and stands as a matter of perception. Even Francoise's racial identity is complicated. Although she is French, she is still depicted as a mouse because she is Jewish. One wonders in this scenario if she had not been the positive character that she remains in the Art's life – for example, if she had been a French woman who he did not know or a French woman with Nazi leanings or even a French woman who identified herself as American – then what would her ascribed identity have been. She could easily have been a frog, a dog or even a cat. This racial confusion is also present in the pages where Spiegelman has drawn the characters in such a manner that it is apparent that they are wearing masks. This may be interpreted as Spiegelman's way of saying that external characteristics that help to identify race actually hide more than they reveal, that people's identities – racial or otherwise – are too complex to classify into separate boxes, so to speak and also that race itself is ultimately farcical. With the ambiguity in Art and Francoise's racial identities, we thus identify a racial complication that may be more applicable to the newer generation than the older. This complication is because of various heritages coming together and also migration. However, this phenomenon is by no means limited to only the younger generation, even though it might be more widespread there. The character of the Polish nanny might be recalled, the one who was kind to Art and Anja, lending her quite a different aura in the eyes of the audience as opposed to the other Poles seen in the graphic novel. Thus, Spiegelman's various explorations of racial identity, especially of his own family's, reveal his

personal view of race as a farce while at the same time affirming the impact of the racial heritage on his own identity as well as that of those around him.