

Pen, ink, and gas: the use of comics in maus



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While Art sits at his drawing board, a pile of emaciated Jewish bodies lies below him, seemingly unnoticed while reporters and businessmen climb over them (II. 41). These bodies represent the grave nature of Art's subject matter, the millions of dead Jews demanding that their story be told accurately, that their murderers' atrocity not be trivialized. And at first glance, as we see roughly drawn, animal versions of soldiers fighting in one of the most terrible wars in history, it may appear as though Art's book epitomizes this trivialization. But as we delve deeper into his world, we soon discover the rich depth that his medium provides in its opportunity for vivid metaphor and enlightening perspective. Maus chronicles not only the harrowing story of Vladek's survival, but also the story of Artie's coming to terms with his father's experiences. These two worlds and the cultural contexts associated with them are constantly juxtaposed as the narrative seamlessly alternates between them, the characters and background instantly providing the context for any given panel. For example, inserted into the myriad of examples of how Vladek was a victim of anti-Semitic Nazi treatment is a scene in which we learn that he himself is just as racist toward black people, or "shvartsers," as he calls them, as the Nazis were toward him (II. 98-100). Vladek doesn't even believe it makes sense to compare blacks and Jews. This stark contrast between what we read and what we would at first expect exists because the two stories are so interwoven; we can't help but compare Vladek and the Nazis, and the similarities we find are disturbing. Art's choice to include without modification his previous work, *Prisoner on the Hell Planet*, is an interesting one (I. 100-103). The brief segment is chronologically halfway between the two main narratives, and it helps to tie them together. We gain an idea of how the Holocaust affected

Art's parents and how they in turn affected him, their emotional instability mixing up his emotions so that he ends up blaming them, the Holocaust, and everything else that enters his mind. By including the main autobiographical narrative, we can glimpse both Art's difficulty in understanding his parent's experiences as well as his father's difficulty in understanding that his son is living in a new era, one far removed from the Holocaust. We can take the familiar place of Art and, like him, see his father's story through his father's eyes. Some memories are so important to us, so fiercely horrifying or intensely pleasant, that the sight becomes burned into our mind, every minute detail of the scene unforgettably captured. No representation, be it words, a picture, or a movie, can do these moments the justice they deserve, but Art's expressive drawings come close. We get a glimpse of what it might have been like for Vladek, looking down on the burning bodies, watching the gasoline and human fat being poured to accelerate the blaze (II. 72). Art depicts these intense memories of Vladek's experience with subtly different drawings, using heavy lines and dark, intense shading so that the emotion bleeds off the page. There are no speech bubbles to represent a passage of time; the memory is condensed to a single instant, frozen, captured on the page just as it was captured in Vladek's memory. These evocative panels transport us directly into Vladek's point of view, and they could never exist in any other medium. The comic form also allows Spiegelman to utilize symbols to express mood and feeling. When Vladek and Anja leave the ghetto and begin walking to Sosnowiec, they feel lost, not knowing what will come next as they search for some place to stay and hide (I. 125). Art encapsulates this feeling of nervous suspense with a casual inclusion of swastika-shaped crossroads, and this subtle symbolism immediately conveys a torrent of

information. Even though they are near their home, they feel as though they are in a foreign world. They realize they have no choice but to walk the Nazi path, knowing they could run into trouble at any moment. And what looks to be a crematorium in the background suggests that, if they chose the wrong path, they will end up like their many relatives and friends, snuffed out by the Nazis. All this information and emotion is communicated through the powerful illustration of a single panel, a testament to the suitability of the comic medium for Art's subject matter. One of the most apparent instances of symbolism in *Maus* is the animal-headed characters. Anthropomorphic animals are, of course, nothing new to the world of comics; we don't think twice about the absurdity of talking rodents and we easily accept the almost cliché relationship between cats and mice that we find in *Maus*. But unlike Tom and Jerry, whose roles as animals are portrayed only literally, Art's animal heads are used to represent the stereotypes associated with the different groups in the social arena of the time. The Germans are represented by cats, instinctive hunters of Jewish mice, who in turn are seen as vermin to be exterminated; this association of mice with Jews may be based on the German anti-Semitic propaganda film, *The Eternal Jew*, in which a pack of rats emerging from a sewer is juxtaposed with Jews in a crowded street of a Polish ghetto¹. The mouse metaphor also captures the resourcefulness and scavenging nature of mice as well as their inability to ever be wiped out entirely. And just as cats don't view mice as bitter enemies so much as instinctive food, many Germans were not fully conscious of their antagonism toward Jews, instead simply swallowing propaganda and obeying orders. The separation of characters into distinct species may seem at first to be trivializing and unnecessary, but it does

effectively capture the stark stratification that existed during the World War II era. Adolf Hitler's quote, "the Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not human," epitomizes the viewpoint held by many Nazis who truly viewed the Jews as a separate species. At one point, a mouse claims that he is in fact German and should be relieved from the harsh treatment given to the Jews. Spiegelman drew the character twice, once as a mouse and once as a cat; to the Germans, there was no middle ground, and their identification of the man as a Jew ensured his untimely death (II. 50). Yet individual characters are given the choice of living up to or breaking away from those stereotypes. We see Jewish police forcefully sending Vladek's grandparents – fellow mice – to Auschwitz to be killed with millions of other Jews (II. 87). We hear of a German officer's girlfriend convincing him to spare hundreds of Jews (II. 108). And we meet both a Pole who informs the Gestapo of hiding Jews (I. 113) as well a Pole who accepts Jews into her household to hide them from Nazi patrols (I. 141). What shines through is not how each character conforms to the stereotypes associated with their species, but how, fundamentally, there is no difference between mice, cats and pigs; how, truly, there are both cruel and compassionate, ruthless and merciful, malicious and benevolent members of every nationality, every ethnicity, every religion. Characters in *Maus* are frequently shown to wear masks representing a confusion of identity, intentional or otherwise. In *Maus I*, these masks are visible when characters pretend to be of another species, such as when Vladek identifies himself as a Pole to a train man so that he might let him board in secret (I. 64). The ease by which Vladek can assume the part of another race, represented by the donning of a simple mask, demonstrates how quickly the supposed differences between species melt away when the

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racial divide is eliminated. In *Maus II*, these masks take on a more complicated role during the meta-narrative at the beginning of chapter two, where several characters, including Art himself, are seen as humans sporting only masks instead of actual animal heads. The temporary lapse of metaphor allows us to understand that the identity provided by our race and nationality - our species - is really just a mask that we wear. That underneath our masks, we're all just people. By assigning specific animals to broad groups of diverse people, Art highlights the absurdity of making such generalizations. Just as Art can't decide what animal his wife should be drawn as - a mouse, a frog, or something else entirely? (II. 11) - so too is it senseless to attempt, like Hitler, to assign simple categorizations to the deep, complex psyche that makes us human. It is the very artificiality of Art's metaphor that allows him to so evocatively capture the reality of the Holocaust. This personal touch, this intimacy, is what makes *Maus* so powerful. We can not only see but experience the toll Hitler took on Vladek, on his family, and on the world. We can experience, through Art's brilliant metaphor, the social mindset of the war's participants. And by the time we finish the last page, we have experienced more than just what Vladek survived. We have experienced what it was to have survived it.