

Merging past and
present in art
spiegelman's
complete maus tales



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In general, comic strips and graphic art are given little attention as complete works of literature. Considered to be lacking substance and novelistic qualities, graphic novels are undeservingly lumped into a category that does not account for their quality and influence. With that being said, Art Spiegelman's MAUS Tales conquers generalizations about graphic novels and in turn, has become an example for demonstrating the ways frames, panels, and faces can produce narrative qualities inaccessible to traditional, non-pictorial novels. Uniquely, MAUS primarily weaves between two separate timelines which allow Spiegelman to tell his story in addition to his father's. The frame-tale timeline begins in the narrative present with author Art Spiegelman interviewing his father, Vladek, about his experiences during the Holocaust for the project Artie hopes to complete. In the narrative past, Artie recounts the years leading up to the war and follows his parent's story through their liberation from Nazi concentration camps as told to him by his father. Accompanying this detailed history are simple, minimalistic drawings that Spiegelman uses to explore real life images and to create a type of universality for all readers. With that being said, Spiegelman's Maus uses a combination of words and images to create an inviting, engaging, and realistic account of the Holocaust that effectively merges past experiences with present daily life.

Within the novels, Spiegelman uses a carefully calculated hybrid of text and visual in order to transform the narrowly relatable Holocaust experience into an open and inviting discussion for all readers. Most importantly, the predominant visual metaphor in MAUS is the depiction of German, Polish, and American Jews as mice. Drawing in a minimalistic and iconic style,

Spiegelman relies on their simplicity to become the object of reader's projection and sympathy. Interestingly, as the novel progresses, the mice drawings become less and less representative of mice and increasingly imitate a human form. For example, the novel's prologue shows a young Artie and his father most closely resembling mice, complete with mouse ears, facial fur, and even tails (Spiegelman 5-6, panels 1-10). Yet these details become decreasingly prominent as the story moves forward. By the end of MAUS I, it is only his triangular head and ears that separates Artie and the other mice from a rough human sketch (Spiegelman 160-161). By initially illustrating his characters as welcoming and cartoonish, Spiegelman prompts the reader to project themselves into the story and experience thoughts, feelings, and emotions the same way the characters do. As the Jews become less and less animalistic, the reader is trapped in a human experience without realizing it. Furthermore, it is this disassembling of the mouse allegory that allows Spiegelman to elicit sympathy and compassion for the oppressed in their situation. With that in mind, it is equally important to consider why, then, do the novel's other characters remain unchanged throughout the story? Although the mice eventually lose their whiskers, their tails, and other specific traits, the Nazi cats in the story never lose their stripes or whiskers, nor do the pigs ever become less distinctive. Spiegelman's choice in allowing the mice to become more and more iconic and universal while other characters/nationalities remain unchanged prevents the reader from sympathizing with or relating to any group other than the Polish and German Jews. In doing so, Spiegelman successfully transforms the selective trauma and suffering of the Holocaust into something that is palatable and understandable for all audiences.

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To further demonstrate the effectiveness of the choice to keep the illustrations simple, we can contrast the MAUS drawings with Spiegelman's Prisoner on Planet Hell comic, which describes the emotional trauma surrounding his mother's suicide. The comic-within-a-comic starkly contrasts MAUS's simplified artwork with highly stylized, detailed drawings of real humans that depict Art's personal distress and suffering following the death of his mother (Spiegelman 102-105). Whereas Maus uses vague illustrations to create an inviting and relatable experience, Prisoner on Planet Hell feels isolated, personal, and specific in comparison. On that note, often times reading a historical account leaves the reader disconnected and disinterested; however, Spiegelman manages to create an involved and educational narrative without ever directly addressing the reader. In short, through his oversimplification of illustration, Spiegelman achieves what a traditional novel can not.

Ostensibly, MAUS Tales gives an explicit history of the Jewish experience throughout the Holocaust. Implicitly, however, Spiegelman emphasizes the psychological torment produced from inconceivable suffering and its lasting effect throughout generations, continuing into the present day. From the first chapter, Spiegelman incorporates signifiers of both the past and present in his drawings as well as his text. Within the first few pages, the reader is shown Vladek's concentration camp tattoo, pre-War photographs of both Artie's parents, and even historically accurate depictions of telephones (Spiegelman 14-15). Yet the past is seamlessly integrated into the present with the inclusion of Artie. For example, in chapter three, Artie's body physically becomes the link between the past and present-day. Lying on the

floor of his father's New York apartment, Artie is looking in Vladek's direction as he waits for the narrative to continue. Meanwhile, his legs are literally overlapping the previous frame that illustrates Vladek hiding in army trenches (Spiegelman 47, panels 1-2). By doing so, Spiegelman is disallowing the past to be removed from the present. Similarly, there is a verbal intersection of past history and present experiences. When Vladek is detailing his experience cleaning stables as a Prisoner of War, he interrupts his own thought: " But look what you do, Artie! You're dropping on the carpet cigarette ashes. You want it should be like a stable here?" (54). As the story moves forward, these narrative interruptions become slightly more sinister and haunting. For example by Maus II, Artie's cigarette smoke billows up to become the smoke of dead bodies being burned in the Auschwitz crematorium (Spiegelman 229, frames 7-9). By including these moments, Spiegelman proves that the past and the present are not mutually exclusive: it is impossible to understand the present without first understanding the past, and vice versa. Ultimately, he is asking the reader to consider their relationship with history, suggesting a sort of continuousness of the past into the present-day.

All in all, The Complete MAUS Tales directly confronts and dismisses criticism that claims graphic novels are the lesser in comparison to conventional, non-pictorial novels. By creating a unique hybrid of both text and images, combined with carefully thought out animal allegory, Spiegelman transforms an insulated experience into something inviting and worthy of world-wide readership. In conjunction, he uses this universally palatable narrative to

prompt an active engagement in historical events and successfully shows how these events transition into and impact the present-day.

Work Cited

Spiegelman, Art. *The Complete Maus*. Pantheon Books, 1991.