

The means of stylistics used and their influence on the text in maus



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In any artistic work, aesthetic style is a crucial aid to the viewer's understanding of the piece as a whole. Art Spiegelman's remarkable publication *Maus* breaks the conventional barriers of the past between comics and what were then considered to be serious novels. As a graphic novel about a horrific atrocity, *Maus* is the first work of its kind. Through the style of his drawings, Spiegelman is able to use illustration to aid in the telling of a story. Each individually crafted panel is detailed enough to be significant alone; together, they create a rich tapestry of images which portray a powerful story without compromising the work's literary integrity. Page 87 of *Maus* is an ideal example of Spiegelman's combination of thoughtful detail and underlying meaning in his drawings.

In panels 2, 3, 6 and 7 of page 87, Vladek and Artie are only shown as silhouettes. This might be taken to represent a connection with Vladek's past. As Adolf Hitler is quoted to have said, "The Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not human," Jews were not viewed as worthwhile individuals. As the camps and gas chambers filled, each Jew became only a number, if even that. As the Jews were faceless then, Vladek is depicted as being faceless in the present.

Yet, it is noteworthy that Vladek's glasses are still visible against his dark silhouette. Glasses stereotypically represent a person's thought and intellect, and in these panels, spectacles imply a hint of Vladek's human aptitude. The contrast between the glasses and the silhouette is an ironic detail beyond what the initial glance might discern. Thoughtful details like these that appear throughout *Maus* are significant in their ability to lend a sense of humanity to an inhumanly cruel tale. Almost six million Jews were massacred

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during the Holocaust; although many works have been written about and around the events of the Second World War, Spiegelman, through the use of image, attempts through new venues to help the reader relate. In *Maus*, the people – often victims of history – are revived, transformed and metamorphosed into hand-drawn characters. Although these comics, because they are inherently two-dimensional, cannot do complete justice to multi-dimensional human beings, they do not deviate far from the truth.

Perhaps for entertainment value, or to an extent, to alleviate the grim nature of his novel, Spiegelman adds a caricature-like quality to the depiction of his characters, particularly Vladek, who becomes the stereotypical Miserly Jew. This almost laughable quality is most obvious in the novel when Vladek, who – even in his advanced age – continues to carry home small knickknacks and bits he finds along the street, refuses to part with a piece of wire he discovers while strolling with his son. Vladek is additionally depicted as being petty and unforgiving, harsh in speech and uncouth in manner, and somewhat a bigot. However, it is ironically also these personality flaws that cause his rodent-faced character to appear more real, more “human.” As the reader comes to silently despise Vladek for his numerous shortcomings, he becomes increasingly attached to the character on an unconscious level. This unconscious concern for the character later translates into compassion and sympathy, and gradually the thoughtful development of *Maus*’s characters causes us to almost forget that even Vladek has a rodent tail. In the telling of the story, as Jews are mice, not inherently harmful but reputed pests requiring riddance, Nazis are given cat faces, somewhat menacing, but

strangely more physically resembling humans than those of their rodent counterparts.

As the reader becomes drawn deeper into the tale and closer to the characters, drama within the plot takes on increased effect. By page 87, the reader has already witnessed the setting of the scene for the entrance of concentration camps into the story. On page 86, the suspense and shock build; the individual panels are larger in size than those of previous pages, particularly than the noticeably smaller frames of page 85. It is worthy to note that in most of the book's pages, especially those preceding pages 86 and 87, the mice are not depicted to have visible eyebrows. However, on 86, the expressions of anxiety and fear created by the shape of the mice's suddenly present eyebrows dominate the page. This evokes an air of anticipation in the reader, which carries over into the next page. Here, on page 87, as if finally reaching a crescendo, the panels in which Vladek recalls the past to Artie show the two figures as silhouettes only. Drama becomes heightened; it is comparable to the effect created when the face of a camp side storyteller is illuminated with the single beam of a flashlight. These silhouette panels could even be called negatives, similar to photo negatives, as the color of the subjects and backgrounds are reversed. In film, this type of inverse of light and dark lends a feeling of apprehension, foreshadowing doom of some kind. Despite the intense drama of the page, it is appropriate - this is the first time in *Maus* that Vladek and his family are directly affected by the events at Auschwitz.

Although the story of the Holocaust has been told countless times, and in the present day, the occurrences at concentration camps have all been exposed, <https://assignbuster.com/the-means-of-stylistics-used-and-their-influence-on-the-text-in-maus/>

it is with such subtle details that Spiegelman is able to persuade the reader into shock when Maus characters begin to be exterminated. The reader is forced to rely increasingly on the posture and gesticulations of the figures, Valdek's in particular, and on the dialogue. Especially on page 87, many words are printed in bold lettering. This deviates from previous pages, which have few or no bolded words. Again, these small, easily dismissible coincidences can be proven to be in actuality not coincidences at all, but carefully planned components of the graphic novel.

Maus is a refreshing transgression from the norm. As art, it is impressive in its magnitude; as literature, it propels story telling to new venues. Art Spiegelman has proven that not only can two media of expression be combined successfully; they can be united without detriment to either artistic or literary integrity. He is most commendable, however, not for that which readers notice, but for that which they easily overlook - the subtle yet powerful details that permeate his work, leaving readers breathless without them realizing exactly why.