

Dehumanization case study essay sample

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Dehumanization has been a central topic in discussions within various fields the modern society, from human rights and politics to university studies and daily news around us, but it has been specially discussed by writers and artists as one of the main causes of some of the most important and controversial stages of universal history. These stages include the fight against racism, slavery, sexism, cultural discrimination, etc. But for the purpose of this essay I will be focusing on one specific stage, or I should say historic event, involving dehumanization, that is still causing social indignation and is still being used as a central subject by many modern artists. It is the Holocaust. The Holocaust, also known as “ The Shoah”, was the genocide of millions of people during the Second World War including Jews, homosexuals, people with disabilities, etc. which was state-sponsored by Nazi Germany, but the principal “ target” of this massacre was the European Jewish population.

As mentioned before, many artists and writers have been using the holocaust as a subject for their work, from short essays to published books and novels. Among all of the written works that have been published, there is one that received international recognition and critic, and is now considered by many people as one of the most important comic books created and an essential piece that describes the holocaust. It is Maus by Art Spiegelman. Maus is a graphic novel divided in two books, that tells the story of the author’s father, Vladek Spiegelman, as a survivor of the holocaust. At first glance, the main storyline of the book seems to be the experience of Vladek as a prisoner in Auschwitz and how he managed to get out of there alive, but as you read the book you begin to realize that it is more about

Art's relationship with his father and his family and Vladek's personality after the war compared to other survivors'.

In the book we are presented to many visits of Art to his father with the only intention of obtaining information about the holocaust to write a comic book. It is clear that their relation is not strong and they don't know how to get along with each other, Vladek has a obsession with money, memories of his wife who committed suicide, problems with Mala, a woman with whom he was remarried, and the desire of having his son, Art, close to him, while Art's desire was only to record his father's memories in order to finish his book. The story goes back and forth between the holocaust memories and the visits of Art to interview Vladek, in both cases the topic always leads to talk about the holocaust and despite that this is the principal topic; the book doesn't provide any new perspective about Auschwitz or the tragedy that occurred there, as Vladek is not an outstanding figure of the war, opposite to that, he survives mostly as a matter of luck and some smart, but not relevant to history, ways of making money and contacts.

Then, what is the real subject of the book?

Ian Johnston in his text *On Spiegelman's Maus I and II*, argues that the text sometimes seems to go out of its way to emphasize Vladek's limitations as a human being, showing his racist personality, his troubles dealing with women and his incapacity to deal with his son; but every aspect of the book was drawn and written by the author with a specific purpose, and it probably wasn't to show the figure of his father as an undesirable person, because it is noted that Art is trying to use the book and the encounters with his father as

a way to empathize with his family's feelings and pain, as he didn't live the tragedy and in some way he feels in himself a lack of the historical tradition that his family has. Johnston also analyzes the importance of having, or not, a hero in the story as most comic books do, he notes that at first glance it seems that Vladek is the central character as he is, apparently, the person who inspired the book and he is also who has the memories of the holocaust.

But as mentioned before, he is not a complex or extremely important figure in the war, nor the story; his main role in the book is to be exposed as a survivor who didn't take from the holocaust what other survivors did, and he is not teaching anything relevant about that horrible experience to his son.

On the other hand, Art is also not interested in learning from the experience of his father but just to know the story that characterizes his family. During the whole book we witness the way that Art goes to Vladek's place with the only purpose of getting information to finish his book and know more about his family, but as soon as Vladek tries to establish a deeper connection with his son rather than remembering his dark past, Art gets bored and just goes away to come back another day and continue recording the memories. Art's need of knowing his family's past is also analyzed by Victoria Elmwood in her article "Happy, Happy Ever After": The Transformation of Trauma Between the Generations in Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*. Elmwood points in the first page of her article, The central problem of identity in Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* is the author's need to write himself into a family from whose founding trauma he was absent.

This can be expanded by mentioning that previous to *Maus*, Art Spiegelman wrote a comic strip called *Prisoner on the Hell Planet*, where he writes about his mother's suicide; and it also should be mentioned that Vladek had a son called Richieu who died during his time in Auschwitz, and at the end of the book Vladek calls Art "Richieu" and tells him that he doesn't want to tell more stories. This last line implies that Vladek did have a trauma from the holocaust, and that he just wanted to live his life and try to forget his cruel past, but Art kept pushing him to remember because in some way his desire was to be involved in his family's roots by writing a book in the memory of their suffer and having as much knowledge as he could about it. But he didn't place that desire directly in the book, he does put some emphasis in the dehumanization occurred during the holocaust by representing the characters with animals, using a metaphor of modern society where rats are seen as undesirable beings, cats are supposed to kill them and dogs are bigger and more powerful than cats.

This is a metaphor that has been used widely in our society by giving these animals human characteristic and making them fight, that is the case of cartoons like *Tom and Jerry* by MGM studios or *Cats and Dogs*, a film directed by Laurence Guterman. That metaphor is an important aspect of the book and is something new to our understanding of dehumanization, but it is not something that hasn't been seen before and therefore is not the main point of the remarkable way of showing dehumanization, because seen from the perspective of the book being a piece of art and consequently a way for the artist to express himself, dehumanization is used as an element to connect, explain or maybe excuse the reasons of Art's distant relation to his family.

He is indeed trying to be part of his family's history and to fully connect with them despite of having to deal with his father's hard-to-understand personality, his mother in law, his daily life and the suicide of his mother. Maus is a way for Art to express and explain, maybe not for us but for himself, why he is dealing with all of those horrible events that happened in a time before him.