

Religion in graphic novels: works by Spiegelman and Stur姆



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Contrary to what some might think, the literary field of graphic novels tackles important issues such as gender, race, and religion. One work has stood out amongst the rest as a classic and revolutionary piece that has tackled one of, if not the, most important and diabolical events ever to take place. Art Spiegelman's *Maus* portrays the Holocaust through the story of his Jewish father who survived the traumatic experience. This graphic novel deals with the theme of religion, more specifically Judaism, and sets the tone for future generations of artists in this field. This issue of Judaism can be seen in another highly acclaimed work by James Sturm entitled *James Sturm's America: God, Gold, and Golems*. Sturm's story, *The Golem's Mighty Swing*, shows similarities in the portrayal of the Jewish plight, not in the Holocaust, but in small town America during the 1920's. Both works address the similar theme of religion, and by their artistic talent, show how the Jewish people have been mistreated yet still strive no matter what comes their way. There are, however, differences in the portrayal of the Jews in both works.

Art Spiegelman's depiction of the Jews in *Maus* drew a lot of attention and criticism although it is a very important and symbolic aspect to his novel. Spiegelman depicts the Jewish characters as mice, a creature that most people believe to be disgusting vermin: fighting for scraps of food, hiding, and scraping by with little to nothing. The depiction of the Jewish people as vermin was also a key propaganda feature during Hitler's reign and during his implementation of the Final Solution. In an interview with Nick Higham of the BBC news program, Spiegelman states that was one of the reasons he chose mice:

“ I refer to it as mouse heads, they’re masks...the Final Solution was built on exterminating the Jews, not murdering the Jews. Uh, and the notion of extermination is what one does to, uh, vermin...and it’s not peculiar only to the Nazis” (“ Art”)

The idea of the mice as masks that the characters wear, as opposed to the actual animal, can be seen in Spiegelman’s depiction of himself as he is writing the graphic novel, and speaking to the psychiatrist, as seen below (Spiegelman 201 and 204). This subtle method in his artwork gives the reader a glimpse of the real faces, the humanity, of the characters in the novel.

The image of the Jews as mice is symbolic to the way that Nazi Germany thought of that race during this time period. While it may have seemed a bit harsh, disrespectful, or unsympathetic towards the events of the Holocaust or the people who went through it, in a way, that was what the artist intended. He invokes these feelings in the reader in a way only a graphic artist can, with visual depictions of unimaginably cruel acts, not on humans, but on mice. That is essentially how the Nazis viewed the Jewish people, that they were less than human and infectious to the Arian race. Yet one feels for the mice characters as if they are humans themselves. Spiegelman states in the interview, “ turning this notion of the subhuman back on itself and letting these mice stand on their hind legs and insist on their humanity” (“ Art”) was another purpose in depicting them as such.

This ability of Spiegelman to let the artwork and story create the sense of humanity in characters depicted as mice is seen in his illustrations of the

concentration camps. In the picture below, left-hand side, one can see the utter anguish in the characters' faces. Wide-eyed terror, an empty scream, bodies ablaze in the white hot fire, these characters' utter anguish is felt through the contrast of burnt, black bodies, and the white flames (Spiegelman 199). Despite being vermin the reader feels a sense of sorrow for the characters as opposed to the repulsion they might feel if the Jews were drawn as humans. In the picture on the right, one can even see the fear in the wide-eyed face of the scared mouse with a gun in his mouth as the Nazi, depicted as a cat, shoves the barrel of a gun down his throat while wearing a sadistic grin.

James Sturm also addresses the theme of religion, in particular, Jewish identity, in his graphic novella, *The Golem's Mighty Swing*. In this piece, the Stars of David are a travelling Jewish baseball team in the early 1920's, playing other minor league teams for small sums of money. They are not depicted as animals, but rather ordinary looking Americans. They are indeed a spectacle; however, many townspeople come to the games to mock and abuse the team, hoping that the hometown favorites can crush them and make them look bad. The third frame in this story shows a group of children, one peering over the fence, while another runs up asking, "Jews here yet?" (Sturm 88). Right away the reader gets the sense that people only come to the games to see "real live Jews playing baseball"! One frame shows an elderly lady, whom never comes to ball games, stating, "I'm not here for baseball, but to see the Jews...Thank you very much" (Sturm 89). This elderly lady blatantly expresses what many of the characters throughout feel about

baseball and the Jews, choosing the sport of ridicule over the sport of baseball.

The real portrayal of the Jew as a spectacle in this novel is Henry Bell, or Herschl Bloom, as The Golem. In spiritual terms, and described by Fishkin, another player on the team. The Golem was a Jewish creation, “ a creature that man creates to be a companion, a protector or a servant...But only God can grant a creature a soul and inevitably golems become destroyers” (Sturm 119). This explanation is important to the story because it not only foreshadows the future of the team, but also how the team itself deals with it. The Jews know from their scripture that creating a golem can only lead to destruction and ruin because that is the very nature of the beast. However, in order to obtain money, success, and more games on their schedule they choose to create this beast anyway, though it leads the people to hate the Stars of David even more and causes their team to eventually break up.

Though there are differences in how Spiegelman and Sturm represent characters in their graphic novels, the way the other characters in the graphic novels, the non-Jews, treat them is very much the same. In Maus, the Jews are cast off from society, persecuted for their beliefs, killed and tortured in mass quantities, and stereotyped. The reader sees how the Jews are separated from regular society as outcasts through propaganda and the implementation of ghettos. Sturm’s characters are separated from society in a similar way, though not entirely. The creation of their own team of Jewish players separates them from other baseball programs across America. One can assume that the Jews as individuals were accepted in different places (the manager of the Stars of David, the Zion Lion, once played for the Red <https://assignbuster.com/religion-in-graphic-novels-works-by-spiegelman-and-sturm/>

Sox) these players still stood apart from their beliefs. Even more so when they created a team entirely made up of Jews, where the public could group them together as enemies, not only in the aspect of an opposing team, but also as a danger to the community.

This notion of the Jews as a danger to the community can be seen multiple times in *The Golem's Mighty Swing*. When the team travels to Putnam to play the All-Americans, an editorial is published that can be related to Hitler's propaganda, highlighting the danger these Jews supposedly pose to the community. Titled "What Is at Stake" the editorial goes on to say:

"There is a greater threat that the Putnam All-Americans must vanquish, the threat posed by the Jews. These dirty, long-nosed, thick lipped sheenies; they stand not for America, not for baseball, but only for themselves. They will suck the money from this town and then they will leave. A victory must be had. The playing field is our nation. The soul of our country is what is at stake" (Sturm 137)

This editorial is explicitly racial, derogatory, stereotypical propaganda that riles up the town and causes mass injustices surrounding the game. Before the game even starts a player is beat at the local bar by the opposing team, taking him out of the game. Sturm's portrayal of this character certainly highlights the victimized person, the disfigured, battered body, depressed look on the Jews beaten face, and the outrage of the teammates is seen on the facial expressions as they tend to their brother (Sturm 141). The mob like mentality of the crowd during the game can be related to the mass acceptance of Hitler's persecution. The crowd even goes so far as injuring a

player going after a fly ball in the stands; pulling him in ripping off his hat and glove and causing a wound to his leg all while screaming “ Go home Jews” (Sturm 164).

The climax of the game is seen in the riot caused on the field when the pitcher, The Golem, hits the local favorite in the head after the fly ball incident. The Mighty Golem manages to hold back the entire mob because, though they are enraged, they are still fearful of this creature that they believe to be somehow more powerful because of the propaganda and stereotyping associated with this figure. In the scene inside the dugout, the reader can see how Sturm’s artwork sets the tone for the atmosphere and invokes a religious feeling in the reader. Here we see the Zion Lion; head bowed praying to God that he and his brethren can leave the town with their lives intact. The soft lighting in the scenes contrast with the figures dark beard, making him look like a Messiah figure, especially in the fourth panel where the artist leaves out the background entirely. The white negative space highlights the Zion Lion’s Jesus look, creating almost a light that surrounds him, similar to a halo (Sturm 171). The scene is tense as they pray for safety but in the following page a huge rainstorm that cancels the game seems to be their salvation. A heart-wrenching dramatic scene is uplifted with the assumption that God has answered their prayers and saved them.

This scene is drastically similar to the representation of the characters in Maus, in regards to their religion. Faced with extreme situations: starvation, hiding for their lives, or the incredibly trying and horrific environment of the concentration camps, the Jews cling to their religion and look to God for assistance. Through their trials and tribulations the Jewish people in Maus

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overcome all odds and survive as best they can. They work together and look out for each other. When one needs help, food, or anything else they usually manage to come together. In Sturm's work, the Stars of David also cling to their religion and look to guidance in trying times. Instead of leaving their teammate after he hasn't shown up for an hour, they stay and wait sensing that something wasn't right, and, when they see he is injured they take care of him and make sure he is ok. Also when in the dugout, they are all prepared to do what it takes to protect their friends from the angry mob outside.

The graphic novels Maus and James Sturm's America: God, Gold, and Golems address the common theme of religion in a way exclusive to the medium. Both works show many similarities in the representation of the Jewish people, the portrayal of the people who persecute them, and how the Jewish people overcome the trials, though there are some differences. The artwork by both artists invokes in the reader a sense of pity, emotion, and at times, a religious ethereality in the style. These two authors have shown that the literary genre of graphic novels can handle heavy issues such as religion in a respectable and sophisticated manner, truly setting themselves apart from "comic books".

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