

The significance of masks in art speigleman's "maus" essay sample

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Masks have held countless uses and meanings throughout history. Masks have been used in plays, like those of Shakespeare, traditional dances, social gatherings, even as a form of casual or corporal punishment. Although masks have several different uses in different cultural situations, the meaning of the masks is generally the same. Masks are used to conceal an appearance and assume the identity of another. Metaphorically, masks can be used to hide feelings, to protect oneself, and to block out the outside world. Many of these examples are shown in Art Speigelman's Maus.

During Maus, the illustration of masks is made very obvious. The features are pronounced and it is very clear that the characters are wearing masks. The illustration of these masks is not to be ignored- there must be a message hidden beneath them. Speigelman uses masks to represent many different feelings and situations during the course of his father's story of the Holocaust.

These masks are significant symbols which can quite strongly represent certain feelings of the characters many times throughout the story of Art Speigelman's Maus.

Animal masks are used in Maus to show characters disguising themselves to protect against threatening situations. They are also used in figuratively assuming new identities for the characters, and also as a symbol of punishment. Although some examples of masks in Maus portray a mix of a

few underlying purposes, the ideas behind the masks generally follows the scheme of the three main ideas.

The most evident use of masks in *Maus*, protection, begins clearly in the first volume. Vladek, Anja, and other Jewish characters use masks to disguise themselves as Polish. This is the most literal and physical representation of masks throughout the story. Vladek and Anja must hide the fact that they are Jewish, in order to go undetected and unharmed throughout Poland (Speigelman 136-139). They use pig masks to cover up their mouse faces, so that the Germans and other Poles do not recognize that they were Jewish.

The masks worn by the Jewish mice are used to represent the disguises that Jewish people would have used to escape their detection from Germans and Poles. Jewish people of that time would do anything in their power to blend in, dying their hair, wearing certain clothing, and always taking the mandatory Star of David off of the clothing they owned. Of course, the Jewish people of the time did not wear literal masks like Vladek and Anja of *Maus*, but they always did try to use separate forms of protection to mask their true identity.

Masks can also be used as a form of figuratively assuming a completely separate identity throughout the story of *Maus*. Art Speigelman is always seen illustrating his human character wearing a mouse mask. These illustrations can be taken in more than one approach- one being that he is trying to identify with the Jewish survivors and victims of the Holocaust. Art is aware that he has no way to fathom the intensity of Auschwitz and his inexperience is making the creation of his comic very difficult. The manner in

which the mask is drawn on Art's human character is a way of showing how throughout the creation of *Maus*, Art is struggling to identify with and understand the Jewish people of the Holocaust. He knows that he himself is Jewish, like the mice he has drawn in the comic, but he cannot seem to relate to the life and experiences the survivors of the Holocaust have had. He uses the masks as a way to show he is trying to understand the effects of the Holocaust, but for him, it is not completely possible. He can never be a Holocaust survivor, so in his eyes, he can never be a "true" mouse.

The reporters and journalists shown in the second volume of *Maus* are all humans wearing animal masks as well (Speigelman 42). Why? Because in *Maus*, masks are often used represent people who are detached from the Holocaust and who can only view repercussions. Those who felt or experienced the primary effects of the Holocaust don't necessarily need an animal mask. They are able to completely understand and comprehend the gruesome occurrence first-hand. The media is portrayed as a money-hungry, pillaging, and unruly group of people. The members of the media put on masks to pretend they're interested, and pretend they care. Unlike Art for the most part, the masks are something they have no choice in wearing; they need them to do their jobs properly.

Art feels as though he is trapped behind a mask involuntarily at times although too. The mask he wears during the second version of *Maus* is representational to the feelings he has of being trapped beneath the success of the first volume, the death of his father, his self-consciousness, and the Holocaust as a whole (Speigelman 41-46). He is being held prisoner to these

thoughts, and the mask is a constant symbolic reminder of them to him. The mouse mask is a way to show that after the effects of all these elements, he does not truly feel like himself. The mask is also a reminder to his character in the book, which provokes the guilt of his success, the guilt he feels of the Holocaust, and the guilt he feels of ridiculing his father's story.

Art's psychiatrist, Pavel, is somewhat a prisoner of a mask of his own. Pavel's mask represents his feelings of being embedded in his own past. Pavel does anything in his power to try to forget, and some could say pardon, the occurrence of the Holocaust in his life. He became a psychiatrist, to try and help people better understand and cope with problems of their own. He also fosters strayed cats and dogs (Speigelman 43-46). This could be taken as an indication that he wants to care for as much as he can, because he wants to do the exact opposite of what was done unto him. The mask drawn on Pavel represents that he has found methods to cope with his haunting past, but has not forgotten about it. He is still Jewish, is still a Holocaust survivor, and is still somewhat a "mouse" within the story, but that is no longer what defines him. There is a person underneath the mask, and underneath the titles. The mask will always be there for Pavel, like the Holocaust, but that's not all there is to it. There is always the person underneath the mask.

It is clear that there are many meanings behind Art's depiction of masks throughout the creation of *Maus*. The meanings range from one extreme to another. It is appropriate for this variation throughout the story since masks can hold different meanings to different people. Masks have countless uses and are endlessly symbolic.