

# "maus" by art spiegelman



Art Spiegelman, the author of *Maus*, interchanges between the past and the present to provide an in-depth accounting of his father's memories, his own childhood, and the present struggles between the father and son. This recounting from his father emphasizes the impact and trauma experienced by second generation survivors such as Art himself. The author portrays a second-hand perspective of the Holocaust to enrich the reader's understanding of the atrocities of the Holocaust.

He does this by using a frame story, by using animals to represent humans, and by including graphical accounts from the memories of his survivor-father. The graphic novel displays two very different, but also similar first-person narratives. The author did this by creating a frame story. Spiegelman writes about Art in the future and how he questions his father for information to help him write his story. He then switches the story to Vladek describing the atrocities he faced in Auschwitz and the experiences he endured (Spiegelman 25). Using this literary technique changes the perspective of the story by opening up a new way of looking at the Holocaust.

The first-hand account of the Holocaust is supplemented by a look at how the Holocaust affected his family in the future. This approach is unique and very insightful. We get to see how Art is burdened with post-traumatization because of the second hand-experiences he has lived through. We also get to see the death of Anja and how her death impacted the family. If Spiegelman decided to use one story, we would not get to see all the different effects of the Holocaust on the whole family. Both first-person accounts help the reader see the atrocities of the Holocaust and what they did to the Spiegelman family. Most Holocaust stories focus in on the

survivor's life, but many more people are affected than only the survivor. Many people are victims of Secondary Traumatization. According to the Prandium Journal of Historical Studies, children, such as Art, possess a distinct sense of bearing an unlived trace of the Holocaust past within the present (Kholi 2). Art was not directly affected by the Holocaust but was born with the indirect consequences that the family of survivors has to face. He and his entire family suffered serious consequences as a result of the Holocaust including strained relationships, mental illness, and even death. This allows the readers to see a first-hand account of the atrocities of the Holocaust and also see the effects that the Holocaust played on a survivor's family.

Art's works not only depicted the Holocaust but also examined the relationship of the memory of the Holocaust to the present. Both past and present converge and first and second generation survivors are forever harmed by the painful horrific atrocities of the Holocaust. The use of animals in the story changes the perspective of the Holocaust by giving it a deeper meaning. Hitler convinced his followers that the Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not human (as qtd in Kohli 9). The Nazis divided everyone into separate species, and each species was treated much differently depending on what race you were grouped into. This is juxtaposed in the story.

Spiegelman uses the characterization of the animals in the story to show that they possess very humane qualities. Although they might appear as savage animals that are inferior to humans, they possess the same qualities as the other races. Mice, pigs, frogs, and dogs alike have the same human nature even if their beliefs or appearances are different. With strong human

characterizations, the animals seem more like human than animals.

Spiegelman uses different animals to portray the social and political hierarchy among the races at the time. It forces the reader to see the characters as unequal. On page 64 of Maus, Vladek is shown wearing a pig mask over his face. Vladek was a mouse, but as long as he wore his pig mask, he would be socially acceptable.

If he took his mask off, he could be imprisoned and possibly killed. Although his character and personality had stayed the same, his appearance had not. That is all that mattered at the time. This new perspective of looking at the characters would not be possible without the use of animals to describe the humans. The Holocaust is such a horrific time in history that is difficult to fully recount the tale in written form. It was a difficult accomplishment to record his father's story as a prisoner in the Holocaust camp. He tells us that he felt so inadequate trying to reconstruct a reality that was worse than my darkest dreams and trying to do it as a comic strip there's so much I'll never be able to understand or visualize. (176). In the comic form, all the characters are represented by animals. The cats are the Nazis and the mice are the Jews. The cats have superiority over the mice. They are bigger, stronger and predatory. They have the ability to pull the mice apart and devour them. The mice are generally described as pests and vermin and have no worth or value in society. The metaphor of cats and mice provides context overall as to the importance, power and overall inequality in regards to the relationship between the cats and the mice. It is so hard to believe this time in history could have happened, it seems almost unreal. The title of the story, the German word for mouse, depicts the anti-semitic stereotypes

prevalent during the time of the Holocaust. Jews are described as unworthy of the human race.

People are taken from their families, their jobs, and are systematically massacred with the goal of extermination or extinction. While Art is writing *Maus*, he is unsure if he can really capture the horror of the Holocaust without having lived through it. He is not sure how to portray some of his characters and the events they lived through. While Art struggles with his secondary traumatization, he tells his therapist "Some part of me doesn't want to draw or think about Auschwitz. I can't visualize it clearly and I can't begin to imagine what it felt like" (46). Art uses eyewitness accounts and photographs to bring the past to life. It is not only the recounting of memories being handed over from one generation to the next generation, but it is also the realization that these memories and stories impact the present.

Art and Vladek's strained father-son relationship is a by-product of the Holocaust. Art became enraged with his father when he realized that he destroyed Anja's diaries from the Holocaust. Her memories recounted in her diaries was one of the ways she stayed alive and existed in the present. Spiegelman depicts the second-hand perspective of the Holocaust to emphasize the atrocities that took place. He uses a frame story to show us how Art is burdened with post-traumatization because of the second-hand experiences he has been through. His entire family was placed with the burden of the Holocaust, which included mental illness and death. The use of the characterization of the animals in the story shows the reader that they possess very humane qualities with the ability to feel emotion and think

intelligently, which contradicts Hitler's beliefs. Overall, the reader is challenged by whether one can learn from history and ensure the horrors of the Holocaust do not repeat itself.