

Art speigelman's
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**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The graphic novel *Maus* by Art Spiegelman displays an increasingly tense relationship between him and his father, Vladek. Although Vladek is initially portrayed as frivolous, contriving, self-pitying, detrimentally offensive to his loved ones, and compulsive, the reader eventually learns, through his recollection of the horrors of the Holocaust that Vladek is this way because of the hellish prison that Adolf Hitler placed him in. Throughout this essay I will analyze the father son relationship between Vladek and Art through close reading using themes such as time, guilt, and miscommunication that run rampant throughout their damaged relationship. I will discuss ways in which *Maus* themes such as racial issues, xenophobia, and historical trauma paved the way for generational trauma in regards to Vladek and Art, and how this trauma negatively affects their relationship even more. I will also discuss the ways in which Art is a trauma survivor too, and back up my belief with examples from his very own tangible emotions laid out for readers like myself in *Maus*.

Throughout *Maus*, Vladek can be seen reprimanding Art for several petty infringements such as making a mess with cigarette ash while Vladek reluctantly recounts one of many belittling experiences in the concentration camp involving an officer rebuking him for making a mess of the camp. This correlation between past and present events causes Art to start feeling guilty for the standoffish way he has always treated his father, and instills a deep sense of guilt within his heart. From throwing out Art's coat to burning Anja's diaries, Vladek was constantly doing things that upset Art, and vice versa. Through close reading I realized that many of these transgressions were simply misunderstandings, and had Art and Vladek realized this, their

relationship may have been quite different. Constantly grasping for a father figure, Art is blinded by Vladek's angry and neurotic antics, and upset about the distance between him and his son, along with haunting memories of the Holocaust and the tragic suicide of his first wife, Vladek is not able to act as a proper father figure for Art. Eventually, Art becomes so deprived, confused, and lonely that he wishes he had been at Auschwitz with his parents just so he could truly know what they went through. This is an extreme sign of generational trauma that resulted from years and years of Vladek incorrectly attempting to deal with his own trauma. Emotion runs rampant through this graphic novel, and aids in explaining the complex father and son relationship that is portrayed.

Hidden behind Vladek's recount of his traumatic past in the camps is Art coming to terms with the way history has affected his father. In the beginning and end of each chapter, the reader is hit with an emotional wave of Art's feelings in the present after hearing what his father had to say that day about the Holocaust. At the beginning and end of each chapter, Art describes how frustrated and guilty he feels when it comes to his relationship with his father. In the beginning, Art describes his father as he is- a traumatized survivor just trying to cope with what once went on all around him, all the while being a finicky, self-pitying old man. As the plot thickens, so does Art's understanding of his father through first hand stories of what his father went through. At first the reader may find themselves against Vladek due to the way he treats those around him in the present, but as the story progresses, it is easy to come to terms with why Vladek is the way he is. One example of Art's progressively heightened understanding as the book

goes on is when Vladek accidentally calls him, Art's brother that was murdered in the ghettos. In the beginning of the story, if Vladek had slipped up and made this mistake, Art may have become irate with his due to the belief that his father loved Richieu more, but at the point in the story when Vladek actually does call him Richieu, it can be noted that Art actually feels content with his father's mistake, and Art sees that it was out of love for both him and his brother.

I appreciate the graphic novel recount of this particular subject because I believe it is able to engage the reader in ways that common novels cannot. Throughout Maus, a reoccurring motif is a chimney, illustrating victims' brutal fate without actually having to say it. This reoccurring chimney symbolizes the constant weight of fear on the shoulders of the Holocaust victims; fear that they might soon be exterminated. Another reason a graphic novel was a wonderful way for Art to recount his father's story is because he can simultaneously show how he feels without interrupting his father's narrative and vice versa. I don't believe that this could be done in the form of a novel.

After analyzing Vladek and Art's relationship, Vladek's strange quirks cause Art to be annoyed by him in many ways. Although Art's mission was to get his father's story out there, his father's mannerisms annoy him greatly along the way. The outbursts between father and son throughout this story soon become a source of guilt for Art, as he copes with trying to understand why his father acts the way he does. This major theme of guilt is shown throughout the graphic novel in many ways. Art feels guilty for not being a good son, Art feels guilty for the suicide of his mother, and Art feels guilty for <https://assignbuster.com/art-speigelmans-depiction-of-the-association-between-a-son-and-his-dad-as-illustrated-in-his-book-maus/>

becoming successful and capitalizing off of Maus. " Maybe your father needed to show that he was always right - that he could always survive - because he felt guilty about surviving. And he took his guilt out on you, where it was safe...on the real survivor". This quote from Maus describes the tension between father and son and its cause, guilt. Vladek was constantly feeling survivor's guilt, after the death of so many fellow Jews and the death of Anja, causing him to take it out on his son, " the real survivor". But the question remains about whether or not Art believes his is a real survivor, due to the fact that he always feels extremely down about himself due to his relationship with his father and his guilt.

It is very important for the reader to see that Art is impacted by his father's traumatic narrative so that the reader can fully grasp what second-generation trauma means when it comes to the relationship between father and son. Art even goes so far as to state, " I know this is insane, but I somehow wish I had been in Auschwitz with my parents so I could really know what they lived through! ... I guess it's some kind of guilt about having had an easier life than they did." This truly displays the heartbreaking impact of Vladek's recount; his story had affected his son to the point where in order to fully understand his father's grief, he wanted to put himself in his father's shoes...literally. The impact of his father's grief and his mother's suicide shaped Art as a person, and in order to be able to tell his story completely, Art had to put all of this out on the table for readers.

Vladek's character had been greatly shaped by the Holocaust, and this shows throughout the graphic novel as he is unable to lead a normal life, as well as Mala and Art calling him out for his behavior. Vladek's instinct is to <https://assignbuster.com/art-speigelmans-depiction-of-the-association-between-a-son-and-his-dad-as-illustrated-in-his-book-maus/>

ration money and food in case tragedy strikes again, and he has certainly taken up a particular xenophobia due to Hitler's control over Jews during WWII. Vladek is also obsessive compulsive, which causes Mala and Art great annoyance, only straining their relationships even more. Vladek has also isolated himself from the public due to his extreme trauma. Art actually helps Vladek give meaning to his survival by having him tell stories from his treacherous past, but this does not happen without many obstacles between the two. The form of the graphic novel allows Art to candidly lay out his worries about depicting his father's frugality. He worried that displaying the truth about how cheap his father is would perpetuate the stereotype of the "cheap Jew", but the strain that this quality put on his family was too much not to share.

Art's fascination with recording Vladek's description of the Holocaust forces him to associate with his father much more often than usual, and Vladek's grumpy resistance doesn't help a bit. The beginning of Maus illustrates this, and shows that neither father nor son are able to understand each other and relate to what the other is going through. Art cannot get over the fact that his father is having a hard time recounting what happened to him during his horrific past, and Art is having trouble placing himself in his father's shoes. This causes frustration to build within Art, and he tries to force information out of his father that his father no longer has due to trauma. Pretty soon, Art discovers that Vladek has destroyed Anja's journals, the only tangible evidence of her life left over, and Art calls Vladek a murderer, only setting them farther apart than they were before. "Congratulations! ... You've committed the perfect crime ... You put me here ... shorted all my circuits ...

cut my nerve endings ... and crossed my wires! ... You murdered me, Mommy, and you left me here to take the rap!!!” Art feels betrayed by both of his parents for their actions due to the Holocaust, and he is still unable to put himself in their shoes. He feels that they are very selfish, and he doesn't think their actions were fair to him because he was just a kid.

Another aspect that separates Art from his father is his father's estate. “ Talking about your estate just makes me uncomfortable.” He's also concerned with his father's legacy “ in a broader sense, in the sense of a cultural tradition, and also in the sense of psychological or emotional baggage” (Shmoop). Along with the looming memory of “ the perfect child” Richieu, and the lack of input from Anja due to her suicide, Art feels overwhelmed by grief, guilt, loss, and misunderstanding. Art is forced to deal with looking at a large, blurry, framed photo of his late brother, and states, “ it's spooky, having sibling rivalry with a snapshot”. Art also feels skepticism towards his father's ability to love, which he shows through the illustration of his father's relationship with Mala. Art has to deal with his father's obsessive-compulsive ways, while his father has to deal with what he endured in his past. “ Pop just wanted to leave the leftover food around until I ate it. Sometimes he'd even save it to serve again and again until I'd eat it or starve”, states Art, in reference to his father's ways. One of the reasons that I believe Art drew most of Maus in an almost childlike way, using mice as characters, is because he was unable to fully visualize his father's reality. Prisoner on Hell Planet, on the other hand, is drawn very differently, and in great detail, because it was all about the ways Art felt during his mother's suicide, almost like a trip inside of his brain.

Art displays how much his father makes him feel incompetent, because, after all, nothing Art did would ever be as awesome as surviving the Holocaust. Vladek even thought him becoming an artist was a bad idea; he didn't think it would make Art any money. Art feels as if his father thinks that if Richieu was still alive, that he would be the ideal child. "The photo never threw tantrums or got in any kind of trouble... it was an ideal kid. And I was a pain in the ass. I couldn't compete". Art believes, and Vladek validates, that every small mistake he makes causes Vladek to think of how perfect Richieu would have been in the same situations. In reference to his father's abnormal behavior, "" in some ways he didn't survive", Artie says, and looking at the pathetic figure that Vladek cuts, when compared to the pre war resourceful young Vladek, one cannot but help agree with Artie" (Ghosh). Art's whole life, Vladek has been so distant that Art believes that while Vladek's body survived the Holocaust, not all of his soul did.

All in all, Maus not only demonstrates the atrocities that Vladek went through in the Holocaust, but also the strong sense of guilt and disconnect that his son feels as he goes through life everyday with a father who survived the Holocaust. Many second generation trauma victims feel this way about their family members who have endured horrific events in their past, and a plethora of other feelings come up, also. Art demonstrates his own feelings in Prisoner on Hell Planet, while simultaneously striving to display his father's recount of the Holocaust." Maus is part of second-generation literature that strives to both learn about the influence of the first generation's past on their present, and to work through and comprehend their relationship and identity in the context of this traumatic and absent past" (Blanchard).