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The Medium is the *Maus*: A Literary Critique

When Art Spiegelman inked his first panel of *Maus*, did he know it would be his legacy? And would he know that once he put on that “mouse mask,” he would never be able to take it off again? In 1986, Spiegelman published the first volume of his comic masterpiece, *Maus*. His father’s Holocaust story, forever known and seen by millions, was now captured in the chapters of an award winning novel. Over the years, it earned praise and faced heavy criticism, being the first graphic novel to win a Pulitzer Prize in 1992. “People are usually very upset when they first hear that I’ve done a comic strip about the Holocaust. Like, it’s an oxymoron somewhere in there, and people just don’t want to hear any more after that” (Gross). However, undoubtably, what the novel does best is capture the genuine relationship between Spiegelman and his father, Vladek. Not only is it a portrait of a Holocaust survivor, but it also delves into how that aspect of Vladek affects his entire family, particularly his son. Since the novel is written in Spiegelman’s perspective, the audience is introduced to a story within a story, that focuses on his journey of self-discovery in the shadow of his father. By sharing his father’s story, Spiegelman learns to sympathize with his parents’ experience from the Holocaust, and in turn, process his own intergenerational trauma.

In addressing the trauma of his father, Spiegelman reveals that his own trauma is interchangeable with it. Vladek’s story is a birthright, and creating *Maus* is how

Spiegelman came to accept that aspect of his identity. The choice of making the act of storytelling itself to be the vessel for the main plot recognizes Spiegelman's role in his father's legacy. Through processing and transcribing this history, he himself becomes the protagonist and this is his story as much as it is his father's. Although the novel advertises the experiences of Vladek as the central idea, it is ultimately told through the lens of his son. How this trauma is passed down through the generations is the true narrative of the story. "It's about a cartoonist trying to envision what his father went through. It's about choices being made, of finding what one can tell, and what one can reveal, and what one can reveal beyond what one knows one is revealing (Spiegelman, *MetaMaus* 73). In the prologue, this idea is introduced from the first couple of pages. A younger Artie is seen playing with his friends, when they leave him behind after he trips over his loose roller skate. He turns to his father for comfort, when Vladek is reminded of his experience with friendship during the Holocaust. "If you lock them together in a room with no food for a week, then you could see what it is, friends!" (Spiegelman, *Maus* 6). This scene introduces the idea that, from an early age, the Holocaust's imprint on his relationship with his father was just a part of his life. In an interview from 1987, Spiegelman recalls his exposure to the Holocaust as a child. He states, "Well, I can't remember not knowing, but on the other hand, I can't remember it ever being a significant fact. It was just one more thing that I knew about my parents... It was built into the fabric of our life without it being a specifically pointed one" (Gross). The choice of creating this book so transparently through his own narrative, recognizes the ties these Holocaust experiences had on his life.

Secondly, creating *Maus* helped Spiegelman sympathize with his father's experiences, because it required him to synthesize his family's history. In transcribing these stories, he develops a better understanding of his familial dynamic and how Vladek was affected by the Holocaust. Spiegelman shows this throughout the book through his interactions with his father. For example, when Vladek is convincing Artie to take Mala's leftover foods, he refuses to waste even a little of it. He says, "I cannot forget it... ever since Hitler, I don't like to throw out even a crumb" (Spiegelman, *Maus* 238). In choosing to keep interactions like this in the book, Spiegelman recognizes how past experiences from the Holocaust are still prominent in his father's actions. In an interview from 1987 with interviewer Terry Gross, Spiegelman brings up the concept of an "anniversary reaction." He acknowledges that when he began working on *Maus*, he was 30 years old, which was the same age his father was when he was sent to the concentration camps. He attributes this coincidence with the level of connection that is required to create a book such as this. "In order to draw *Maus*, it's necessary for me to reenact every single gesture, as well as every single location, present in these flashbacks" (Gross). The act of essentially reliving his father's experiences allowed Spiegelman to empathize with him. Although their relationship as father and son was strained and they achieved no catharsis in the book, this level of connection gave him a better understanding of his father. In learning to sympathize with Vladek's experience, Spiegelman was able to acknowledge this aspect of his identity.

Lastly, using art and storytelling as an outlet for grief allows Spiegelman to process his intergenerational trauma. The concept of intergenerational trauma first emerged "through studies of the children of Holocaust survivors" (Lehrner, Yehuda).

According to an article from 1966 on the long term effect of the concentration camp experience, "...Their children, all of whom were born after the Holocaust, display severe psychiatric symptomatology. It would almost be easier to believe that they, rather than their parents, had suffered the corrupting, searing hell" (Rakoff). Spiegelman displays symptoms of this as the son of Holocaust survivors. "He was hospitalized in 1968 for his mental illness, and was further triggered by his mother's death later that year" (Spiegelman, *Maus* 102). He is transparent in how his works are personal and that the stories he shares are personal for a reason. Spiegelman states in an interview, "And I think that I've found a safer way of dealing with all this stuff by drawing a book." (Gross) His work is a form of regulation, defined as "the ability of an individual to modulate an emotion or set of emotions" (APA Dictionary of Psychology). In the aftermath of his mother's death, Spiegelman created the comic *Prisoner on the Hell Planet*, which was included in *Maus*. The comic expresses Spiegelman's internal distress through its expressionist art style, frequently using harsh line work to evoke intensity. It also captures his thoughts during this troublesome period. He writes, "I felt confused, I felt angry! I felt numb! ...I didn't exactly feel like crying, but figured I should!" and "you murdered me, mommy, and you left me here to take the rap!" (Spiegelman, *Maus* 103-106) Through previous works as well, one can infer that Spiegelman uses art and story to process his trauma outside of *Maus*. For example, first published in 1978, his anthology of early work, *Breakdown*, features experimental media that "reveal how he internalizes his parents' lingering trauma" (Alter). Through processing his connection to his parents and the Holocaust in art, Spiegelman is not only able to cope with his own trauma, but also share his experiences in a genuine, vulnerable manner.

In conclusion, *Maus* was a coping mechanism for Spiegelman to work through painful and traumatizing experiences in both his and his parents' lives. The novel encapsulates the influence of intergenerational and long lasting trauma. It emphasizes that even though the Holocaust has officially ended, it will continue to cause pain and fear in the people it affected. Spiegelman himself carries this pain. The Holocaust is part of his identity, just as it was his father's. The trauma is passed on, and it will take multiple generations to heal, if it ever will. However, through portraying this experience in his novel, he keeps its memory alive. This is especially important in times when these experiences are being censored in the strive for a "kinder, gentler, fuzzier Holocaust" (Alter). By acknowledging the intergenerational trauma in himself, Spiegelman acknowledges the legacy of the Holocaust.

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