Maus: A Modern Staple to a Postmodern Stack of Papers

Art Spiegelman uses the implausible potency of the graphic novel medium in Maus to illustrate the remarkable story of his father’s life leading into World War II and through the inescapable brutalities of the Holocaust. At the same time, Spiegelman illustrates his father Vladek’s glaring imperfections: the strained, complicated present-day relationship of Art and Vladek and the remnant emotions of his mother Anja’s suicide. Based on extensive interviews with his father and meticulously researching for almost twenty years, Spiegelman’s Maus is the first graphic novel to win a Pulitzer Prize and is frequently regarded as a postmodern masterpiece.

For an artist to breathe the solemn air of the Holocaust in their work, many scholars have exhausted the quote, “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,” which comes from prominent German sociologist and philosopher, Theodor Adorno, who lived in exile during the period (Chute 201). The Holocaust’s gravity establishes various and numerous reservations; its significance as part of humanity’s recent history is easily recognizable, as people still attempt to find meaning in its abhorrence. Thomas Doherty, Professor of American Studies at Brandeis University, refers to this magnitude and seeming incapable character of comics, challenging, “It remains one event in twentieth-century history in which poetic license and [leniency] are not granted automatically...By its very nature it seems ill-equipped for the moral seriousness and tonal restraint that have been demanded by Holocaust art” (71). Spiegelman identifies with the inherent audacity of his venture, specifically displaying his anxiety during a drive to the Catskills to stay with Vladek after his second wife leaves him. During the ride Artie denigrates himself and his undertaking, saying, “I feel so inadequate trying to reconstruct a reality that was worse than my darkest dreams. And trying to do it as a comic strip!” (Maus 174-176). At this
paradoxical point, Artie the character and Spiegelman the storyteller are one in the same, never having experienced the fears, hatred, and violence his parents faced. Spiegelman’s comprehension of that weight is exemplified in his expressed “inadequacy” at depicting this event. However, he rescues himself and mission through his intelligent use of the comic form when Spiegelman poignantly illustrates in the scene where a depressed Artie is seated atop a pile of dead bodies at his drawing desk (201). This image evokes the notion that Spiegelman profits from the suffrage of the Holocaust, and Artie’s overwhelming apprehension on the notion, which Hillary Chute, a renowned expert on comics and graphic narratives verifies when she argues, “[T]he medium of comics can approach and express serious, even devastating, histories” (200). Spiegelman takes on the most somber subject then proceeds to take the audience on an incredible journey, one that Doherty also captures when he approves, “a Holocaust comic book - became solemn and moving, absorbing and enlightening” (70). Spiegelman skillfully exploits what could be an off-putting drawback into an intriguing yoke; fascinatingly, the graphic form creatively tests the dogmatic, entrenched boundaries of the Holocaust.

Maus’ unabashed portrayals of characters are fundamental postmodern techniques; Spiegelman affixes himself and his father under a microscope as blemished characters and unreliable narrators. In these delineations the proverbial curtain is pulled back to reveal Vladek and Artie the character as flawed, fragile, and insecure people behind selfish masks. Doherty observes, “in service to a greater truth and higher trust…Spiegelman’s fidelity to the unvarnished truth is apparent in his unsparing portrait of Artie as a (sometimes) petulant son and his father as a (usually) insufferable human being” (81). Spiegelman doesn’t hide Vladek’s many shortcomings, predominantly in moments of irritability deriving from his relationship with his second wife Mala, and his lack of trust in her. In relation to Artie, Vladek destroys priceless
valuables left by Anja, hoards and holds merit in useless items, and has a moment of racism and prejudice with a hitchhiker. James Young, professor of English and Judaic studies at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst asserts Artie’s own fallibility, explaining, “Artie promises not to betray certain details only to show us both the promise and betrayal together. Indeed it may be Artie’s unreliability as a son that makes his own narrative so reliable” (676). Spiegelman reveals this loyalty to honesty when Vladek describes his life before meeting Anja; he shares intimate facts about a young love interest, Lucia Greenberg, and the time they spent together. Vladek requests that Artie leave certain details out of the book that wouldn’t be so proper or so respectful, to which Artie promises not to put those details in the book (25). Obviously, Spiegelman veers against the assurance to his father, and stays true to his steadfast approach of candidly narrating. In his thorough honesty, Spiegelman makes their story exceedingly tangible; moreover, it endears the audience to palpable, human characters.

To elucidate and verify Vladek’s aged memories, Spiegelman travels great lengths in researching facts his father brings forth, records conversations, and interviews Vladek several times about certain situations. Also attesting to his honesty as author, Spiegelman inserts historical artifacts to problematize his father’s narration. Doherty verifies, “Maps and diagrams of wartime Europe and the gas chambers at Auschwitz are testimony to the scrupulous scholarship that invests the book with historical authority” (81). In doing so, Spiegelman outlines a visual course through Vladek’s earlier life, one that Vladek admittedly wants to forget, and believes people would not want to hear. To connect the exposed wires of his fathers’ memories, Spiegelman artistically deploys the many tools at his artistic disposal. In Doherty’s words, “a mosaic presentation akin to cinematic montage, panels and maps splash across the page, figures bleed out of and break across rectangular frames, and elaborately designed layouts greet the eye”
These tools are fixtures of the comic art form and storytelling, which assist Spiegelman in connecting gaps of time. As Young closely relates, “Maus also makes a case for an essentially [give-and-take] relationship between the truth of what happened and the truth of how it is remembered” (698). There is no measure of how memories can change over the course of a lifetime; albeit, a life with much turmoil and memories that would like to be forgotten. Chute assigns a similar notion through a quote of Spiegelman’s own, sharing, “’The number of layers between an event and somebody trying to apprehend that event through time and intermediaries is like working with flickering shadows’” (212). As writing and developing Maus took an incredible amount of time, one can imagine the painstaking process Spiegelman went through to be honest to himself, and true to his father’s memories. In his accomplishment, Spiegelman creates a detailed tone of the time, a tangible atmosphere to see and feel for the audience to comprehend through Vladek’s experiences.

Spiegelman’s honesty and artistic expression of the comic medium is why Maus has won a plethora of awards and is held in such high regard. Moreover, Chute contends that “Maus questions the framework of everyday life that is taken for granted” (213). Casual readers can appreciate the accessible nature of the comic medium, marvel at Vladek’s amazing tale of survival, and bond with Artie’s struggle to capture it correctly. But for vigilant readers, Maus is an archetype of postmodern narrative that reshapes the way history and memory can be experienced and retold.
Works Cited


