

# Tension in *Maus*: The Graphic Novel Depiction of the Horrors of the Holocaust

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The writing process is difficult. From the endless research to the countless number of drafts that aren't even used, it can feel fruitless at times. I had a really difficult time narrowing down my topic because I felt as though I had so many big ideas and not enough time or space to explore them. After many meetings and a lot of secondary source reading I finally realized that I wanted to talk about the Holocaust. This was an event that spoke to me because my grandparents had lived through it, and my father was the product of survivors. This hunt led me to *Maus*, which is a graphic novel written by the son of Holocaust survivor Vladek. I identified with this novel because of the prevalence of the Holocaust in my life as well as the similarities and differences I saw. Using this as my primary source, I began to build the basis of my essay.

Two themes in *Maus* immediately piqued my attention. The first was Spiegelman's relationship with his father. They clearly have a tense and distant connection, and yet Spiegelman continues to go back to his father to hear and record his story. The second was the usage of the graphic novel to convey what is both his and his father's narrative. The Holocaust has been depicted over and over again through many different media and in many different lights, but this was the first to do it in such a historically comical way. This was obviously a choice that required a lot of forethought and has a lot of meaning behind it. Many articles and even books have been written about this, but I began to think about the connection between Spiegelman's medium and his content.

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To begin my search I started reading as many secondary sources about Spiegelman's work as I could. Some of them were relevant but most of them were not. I also began reading other Holocaust memoirs to compare them to *Maus*. Through this exercise I realized that there were two main categories of Holocaust memoirs: those that read like straight-autobiographies and those that had intentional authorial choices to convey their story not only through words but also through form. This led me to compare *Maus* with these two other forms in order to find out what *Maus* was doing by introducing a totally new form into the Holocaust memoir genre. This works both ways in that he is both introducing the graphic novel to the Holocaust memoir and the Holocaust memoir to the graphic novel. The interplay between these two fascinated me.

Another genre of secondary sources on Spiegelman deals with his relationship with his father. It was clearly torturous but it also fills some void in him. He relates the story of his own history as well as that of his fathers' within the confines of the same novel and through this relates the two. Spiegelman could not exist without the history of his father, no matter how much it torments him. This is what led me to my final subject of how the graphic novel form relays Spiegelman's relationship with his father and with his history.

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Finding words for the unspeakable Holocaust has seemingly become easier in the last sixty years. There have been countless books, articles, journals, and movies based on the horrific events that occurred under the auspices of Nazi Germany. The first generation is nearly gone, the second generation is aging, and we are now hearing from the third generation. Arguably the most oft-discussed text chronicling the Holocaust, however, remains Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize winning graphic novel *Maus I: My Father Bleeds History* (1980) and the subsequent *Maus II: A Survivor's Tale: And Here My Troubles Began* (1991). This verbal/visual novel retelling by a son of a father's journey from the pre-war years to Auschwitz and then the post-war years has generated almost as much commentary as all other Holocaust literature combined. Both *Maus I* and *Maus II* are widely-acclaimed, *Maus I* won the Special Awards and Citations- Letters, a subcategory of the Pulitzer Prize. It marks a turning point in representation, even as the Holocaust marked a turning point in modern history. Notably, *Maus I* re-writes the Holocaust as far more than about 1933-45 victims and it transforms the medium of the graphic novel. *Maus II* is continuation of both the father and son's stories, from the Dachau to Rego Park, New York. The graphic novel has historically been used as a comic medium and was typically thought of as a way to entertain, having very little weight as a serious literary form. On the other hand the Holocaust is an event that carries such gravity in collective historical mind that to joke about it would have been considered a major offense. Robert Leventhal, a Professor of German who has written extensively on *Maus* said it best: "*Maus* is a very "strong" (in the Bloomian sense) rereading of

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one survivor's tale and the transmission or testimony of this tale to the son; it is at the same time a strong revamping or reconsideration of the generic possibilities of the "comic" itself" (Leventhal, 3). *Maus* deals with both the issues of transmission from father to son, and from son to reader as well as confronting horror with comedy. On both of these levels he challenges his readers' expectations and forces them to rethink how they think about the Holocaust.

Spiegelman's relationship with his mother Anja was just as complicated as his relationship with his father. However she committed suicide when Spiegelman was 20 years old and therefore does not participate in Spiegelman's conversations with his father. Despite this, she does appear relatively frequently throughout the novel and is an almost omnipresent force in Spiegelman's relationship with his father, or perhaps the lack thereof. She always seems to create a void between them because of their different views of her. Vladek saw her as the perfect wife. She was smart, wealthy, and fluent in many languages, which aided both her and her husband's survival during the war. After Anja committed suicide, Vladek burned all of her diaries, essentially erasing her past and cutting Spiegelman off from ever being able to connect with it. It is hinted to in the book that part of the reason for Anja's suicide is her guilt about Richieu's death. A real-life photograph of Richieu, Spiegelman's brother who died during the war, is used in the dedication of *Maus II* along with the mention of his child Nadja. This connects Spiegelman's present to his past despite the fact that his mother has died. Spiegelman's feelings towards his mother are complicated by the fact that she clearly loved him, and yet he felt

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completely abandoned by her suicide. The tension between Spiegelman and Vladek began long before Anja's death, but the loss of the one person who bonded them together caused an immense rift between father and son.

*Maus I* and *Maus II* challenge the expectations of a typical Holocaust novel. Spiegelman chooses to explore the traumatic events of his Holocaust-surviving father's past in graphic novel form, which is thought of as a frivolous literary medium and not worthy of depicting such a traumatic event. According to Robert Leventhal, "*Maus* is the use of a traditionally 'low' genre—the comic strip or book—for serious, grave material. It is a conscious, intentional inversion of the norm" (Leventhal, 3). In other words, Spiegelman confronts genocide with humor. While it is documented that comedy has often been by people in traumatic situations to relieve some of the pressure they were feeling, *Maus* is unusual in its use of comedy to explore the traumatic past of another, namely his father. Throughout telling his father's story, Spiegelman also explores his own dark childhood, marred by the suicide of his mother and the experience of being raised as a Holocaust survivor, while telling father's story. Lastly the graphic novel form itself uses both words and pictures, each in itself would be insufficient to convey his message, but together they tell a story of a father and son's inseparable history. These contradictions embody how Spiegelman experiences his own history.

In order to fully appreciate the "inversion of the norm" by Spiegelman in the *Maus* series, one has to take into consideration the history behind the literary perception of the graphic novel. Scott McCloud, a noted cartoonist and comic

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theorist, declares the image and text cartoon art as a historically comic medium in his pivotal book on the art of the graphic novel *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. In chapter one, called "Setting the Record Straight", he recalls that when he was younger he "realized that comic books were usually crude, poorly-drawn, semiliterate, cheap, disposable, kiddie fare" (McCloud, 3). The first widely-recognized comic book was FUNNIES ON PARADE published in 1933 (Petty, 3) which appropriately was a collection of smaller funny comics that had appeared on the pages of newspapers such as *The New York Times*. The tradition of the graphic novel as a "literary lightweight" with the golden age of comics, in which superheroes such as the Hulk and Spiderman captured the hearts of almost every American. Despite the fact that these comics provided not only entertainment but also became woven into the fabric of American culture, no scholar seriously studied them as works of literature until decades after their publication. Contrarily *Maus* immediately garnered attention as both a successful graphic novel and a critically acclaimed Holocaust memoir. It embodies the contradiction of being both humorous and tragic, which is what created such an appeal for reader and critics.

The history of Holocaust literature, and in particular Holocaust memoirs followed a similar trajectory to that of the graphic novel. The status quo had been developed by the giants of Holocaust literature: Elie Weisel's *Night Trilogy* (1956), Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946), and Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* (1947). Nearly all Holocaust literature until the publication of *Maus* was depressing and serious and many of them were "survivor stories" so through all of

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the pain and suffering there was an inspirational, moralistic tale. These novels did not put on a positive spin on the Holocaust per say, but rather they were stories of phoenixes rising out of the ashes and showed the perseverance of survivors.

Obvious examples of this type of Holocaust literature include Elie Wiesel's *Night Trilogy*, Livia Bitton-Jackson's *I Have Lived A Thousand Years*, and Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau's aptly-named *Out of the Depths*. Even Holocaust autobiographies that don't necessarily have a happy ending include a certain kind of optimism. In Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl*, Anne rearranges her corner of the attic her family is hiding in so that it will feel more like home and she proclaims, "the Annex is an ideal place to hide in. It may be damp and lopsided, but there's probably not a more comfortable hiding place in all of Amsterdam. No, in all of Holland" (Frank, 16). The majority of her family, including Anne herself, was killed by the Nazis in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp and yet there still seems to be an air of optimism and hope of escape in her writing. Her most well-known quote exemplifies Anne Frank's feelings despite the darkness that she was living through,

"In spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart. I simply can't build up my hopes on a foundation consisting of confusion, misery, and death. I see the world gradually being turned into a wilderness, I hear the ever approaching thunder, which will destroy us too, I can feel the sufferings of millions and yet, if I look up into the heavens, I think that it will all come right, that this cruelty too will end, and that peace and tranquility will return again" (Frank, 177).

While much of Holocaust literature is devastatingly sad, the optimism present in much of it has colored how we think of the Holocaust narratives. The fact that many Holocaust memoirs end on a note of survival and continuance can cause us to forget the true pain and devastation caused to so many generations. The



juxtaposition of devastation and humor, genocide and comedy along with detailed grief and guilt by the child of a survivor broke the bounds of what was typically thought of as Holocaust literature until this point. *Maus* rewrites the cultural norm and invents a new discursive space to address the questions of Jewish trauma, guilt, shame and, perhaps most importantly, the transmission of these conflicts from one generation to the next, especially in the case that they are not sufficiently worked-through.

Despite the fact that many survivor memoirs recounted tales of survival and hope, certainly not every memoir written before *Maus* took this approach. In 2002 Imre Kertész, a Hungarian Holocaust survivor, won the Nobel Prize in Literature for his semi-autobiographical work entitled *Fatelessness* (1975). This novel/memoir details the experiences of a young boy, György "Gyuri" Köves, sent to Auschwitz who lies about his age in order to work and unwittingly saves his own life. He is sent to multiple concentration camps after this and eventually survives the war, only to return home to Budapest and face those who were just beginning to hear about the horrors in the camps, essentially reliving his experience during the Holocaust. Although the main character does not share his name with Kertész, his experience mirrors what Kertész experienced during the Holocaust. There is no phoenix-like rising from the ashes, rather the novel ends with the character significantly worse off than where he started. Even the title suggests melancholy. Fatelessness is not inherently a bad thing because it affords one the opportunity to create his/her own fate. It does however cast a shadow on the whole novel. The idea that there is no

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overarching power watching out for us and that the way our lives turn out is haphazard is a source of anxiety throughout the novel. Once the Nazis come to power, Gyuri has absolutely no control. He is moved from camp to camp at the will of those in charge and even when he is liberated and returns to Budapest, he cannot control reliving the Holocaust through the stories of others. The seriousness of this novel and the existential questions that it raises and fails to answer leaves the reader in a state of despair about the human condition. There is very little of the optimism visible in Anne Frank's diary or Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*. Rather Kertesz forces us to think about what happened to those who did not survive, or maybe survived physically but had died emotionally.

Both *Maus I* and *Maus II* are written in graphic novel form, juxtaposing words and pictures to tell many different stories. These novels tell the story of a father through his son's eyes and through this also tells the son's story. Spiegelman interviews Vladek about his experiences in the before, during and after the Holocaust. It is evident that the relationship between father and son is strained from the very beginning of the novel. The generational divide and misunderstanding between Spiegelman and Vladek is exemplified in the first scene of *Maus I* when a ten-year old Spiegelman falls while skating and his friends continue on without him. He comes home crying and when his father asks why, he relays what had happened at the park. His father exclaims, "Friends? Your *friends*? If you lock them in a room together with no food for a week, then you could see what it is, friends!" (I.6, see Appendix A). The Holocaust was an incredibly traumatic event for all those who

experienced it, and the trauma almost always extended in some form or another to survivors' wives, husbands, and children. The use of drawings that characterizes the graphic novel would seem to draw the reader closer to the story rather than just the usage of words in the typical novel. It appears that Spiegelman attempts to do that—draw his reader closer by depicting events with visual images instead of simply telling them.

The usage of pictures to draw a reader into a story has been used repeatedly throughout history. Symbols often have greater meaning than words, for instance the Nazi swastika can evoke a more visceral response in someone than even the most violent description of what occurred in the concentration camps. The connection between pictures and the human response they generate is undeniable. Textbooks use images to break up dense material or novels use graphics to depict complicated maps or objects because the readers connect more with these than with the actual words on the page. Spiegelman's usage of animals to depict humans in both *Maus I* and *Maus II* can first be read as an attempt to endear the readers to his characters or to cause them to think deeply about the stereotypes being portrayed. We tend to think of mice as harmless and lovable, like Mickey Mouse, and yet the mice in *Maus* look more like rats. They are drawn with long whiskers and virtually expressionless eyes. These push the readers away as opposed to drawing them in.

Spiegelman attempts to overcome the guilt he feels being the child of a survivor by confronting Holocaust stereotypes. One of the most infamous usages of stereotypes throughout *Maus* is his depiction of people as animals. The Jews are

drawn as the mice, the Germans are cats, and the Poles are illustrated as pigs. In Nazi Germany Jews were often referred to as vermin and the dehumanization of the Jews was a key component of Nazi propaganda. Previous to the Holocaust, Zyklon B, the chemical used to kill Jews in the gas chambers, was a rat poison. All of these depictions embody various stereotypes about the nationality that they depict, but they also succeed in building a wall between the reader and the story. Drawing the characters in his story as people instead of animals would have lent humanity to the graphic novel- the reader would be able to more aptly picture the events. By using animals instead of humans, Spiegelman creates a tension between his attempt to draw his readers into the story while at the same time distancing himself from his father and his own past.

Utilizing cats, pigs, and mice to depict Germans, Poles, and Jews respectively forces the readers to confront their own stereotypes about the nationalities and ultimately events involved in the Holocaust. Initially the cats may seem to be the “good” characters. People generally think of cats as friendly and harmless. Pigs and mice however are thought of as dirty and undesirable. Spiegelman breaks through these animal stereotypes humans hold and forces the reader to confront the stereotypes he or she has about humans as well. The cats in *Maus* are drawn with ferociously sharp teeth and as significantly larger and more imposing than any other animal. Their eyes are threatening and seem to have an inherent evil drawn in them (see Appendix B). They are nearly the complete opposite of our concept of what a cat should be. On the other hand the mice are drawn as small and harmless, and

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their faces and eyes seem sad and engender sympathy as opposed to disgust. The pigs are relatively innocuous, however they are always portrayed as clean and well-kept, which is the adverse of our usual view of pigs. By turning these animal stereotypes upside down, Spiegelman forces his reader to confront their human stereotypes. The Jews are often described in anti-Semitic literature as dirty, subversive vermin, but in *Maus* they are clean and deserving of compassion.

The usage of animals to depict the different nationalities within *Maus I* and *Maus II* also plays into the comedy of the graphic novel. Playing out the heinous crimes that occurred in Dachau using pigs, cats, and mice is reminiscent of animated children's cartoons such as the Looney Toon's, in which extreme violence was acceptable because it was being perpetrated by animals onto animals instead of human to human. Although in the children's cartoons the violence is typically over-exaggerated in order to make it less realistic and more humorous, the effect in *Maus* is the same. The violence becomes less real and more comical. In *Maus II*, a pig kapo is depicted hitting a Jewish mouse. As his baton strikes the Jewish mouse's face, a star is drawn to the left, similar to the stars seen in cartoon's when a character is hit violently in the head and is said to be "seeing stars" (II.30) This trivialization of the violence experienced by the Jews, real people, during the Holocaust adds a layer of incredibly dark humor. The suggestion that the violence was somehow not real, or imagined, indicates a lack of belief by Spiegelman himself in the stories of his father. He is questioning all that he has ever been told, and everything he has been led to believe.

Spiegelman uses illustrations and comic to depicts horrors of the Holocaust that defy language. In one story Vladek tells him, the Germans hanged four Jews for “dealing goods without coupons” in the ghetto. Spiegelman shows the mice (men) hanging from the gallows with the text “they hanged there one full week” (I. 80, see Appendix C) on the bottom right. Scenes like these from the Holocaust are much more deftly communicated with images rather than words. Instead of elaborately detailing the hanging of these men in words, Spiegelman lets the image of the hanging mice speak for itself. Despite the fact that the viewer is aware that the mice were actually men, the picture conveys the horror without disgusting the reader the same way an image of real men hanging would. This saves the reader from experiencing even a fraction of the trauma of the actual event, but in the same vein creates an even greater gap between the reader and the story.

Spiegelman often uses a technique called “bleeding” to widen the gap between reader and author. Scott McCloud employed this term when discussing the panel of the hanging mice. He explains “when bleeds are used—i.e when a panel runs off the edge of the page—this effect is compounded. Time is no longer contained by the familiar icon of the closed panel but instead metamorphoses and escapes into timeless space” (McCloud, 103). The bottom of the hanging mice panel shows spectators there to watch what was occurring. These animals, which are drawn sketchily but appear to be made up of mice and pigs, are shown only from the waist-up. The bottom half of them “bleed” off of the page, forces the reader to envision what lies below. Although making the reader filling in the bottom-half of

the animals as well as the street may seem like a small detail, it actually creates a distance between the readers and the story by making them fill in details that Spiegelman could have easily provided them with. The shaded and sketchy drawing of the spectators makes them appear as if they are ghosts and not living beings, even though the mice who have just been killed are drawn in the regular solid lines. This suggests that maybe the dead were more complete than the alive. The living beings were just skeletons of what they used to be, particularly when they are being forced to watch the execution of their brethren, and so this is how Spiegelman draws them.

This gap between the reader and Spiegelman's story is furthered because of the lapse that occurs when the reader has to replace the mice he sees with men in his mind, then return to reading the novel and replace those men with mice. The mental energy Spiegelman asks of his reader to constantly remind himself that these events occurred to living, breathing human beings and not just animals puts up a barrier between the reader and the novel that simply using human characters would not. Despite the barrier built by the necessary anthropomorphism of transforming animals into humans and vice-versa, it can also serve as a tool to create a silent conversation between Spiegelman and the reader. According to Carolyn L. Burke and Joby G. Copenhaver in their paper entitled "Animals as People in Children's Literature", using animals instead of people definitely "add[s] emotional distance for the reader when the story message is powerful or painful. However they argue that this technique is not used just to separate reader and story-giver (in this paper the authors are solely discussing children's literature so they speak about the parents as

the storyteller). It is also used to create a conversation between the story giver and reader (in the case of *Maus* this conversation is occurring between author and reader in the mind of the reader). They claim that “the intellectual and emotional distance that the animals’ role-playing allows children and their mentoring adults grants space in which to become reflective and critical concerning life problems and life choices” (Burke, 212). Spiegelman is pushing his readers away by forcing them to anthropomorphize his characters, but he is also creating a safe place for people to confront the realities of what happened in the Holocaust. He forces the reader to humanize his characters, which fosters discussion about stereotypes.

The metaphor of the animals as humans breaks down at two crucial points in *Maus I* and *Maus II*. The first is when Spiegelman inserts a comic he had previously written entitled *The Prisoner on Hell Planet* which details his experience after his mother’s suicide and includes photographs which is a complete deviation from Spiegelman’s typical use of cartoons. The characters in this section are drawn as humans as opposed to Spiegelman’s usual animals. The second instance is in *Maus II* when Spiegelman diverges from the simple back and forth between past and present and engages in a type of metanarrative in which he takes the reader to the year after the publication of *Maus* and five years after his father has passed away. In this section, entitled “Time Flies”, the animals do not completely disappear but rather they take on a self-acknowledged role by appearing as humans wearing animal masks. The bodies of the characters are completely human, as are the back of the heads, but from the side and back the strings that hold the masks onto the



characters faces are visible. Each of these sections features something that is particularly sensitive to Spiegelman, and further breaks down the walls that separate Spiegelman from his reader.

*Prisoner On The Hell Planet* breaks down the distance created by Spiegelman's depictions and language and integrates his reader into the discovery of his story and himself. The introduction of human characters occurs when Mala, Spiegelman's stepmother, reveals to him that his father is upset because he had seen a comic strip that Spiegelman had drawn of his reaction to his mother's suicide. He depicts himself as a prisoner to his father while explaining the sequence of events that occurred after his mother's death (I.102). Scott McCloud defines this type of word-picture combination as additive, where the "words amplify or elaborate on an image or vice versa" (McCloud, 154). Spiegelman is telling his audience what happened-- "we went home... my father had completely fallen apart! I was expected to comfort him!"-- (I.101), while the depiction of himself as a prisoner creates the entirely separate narrative of entrapment by his father and his father's past. This additive technique begins to break down the barrier that Spiegelman has built between himself and his reader, he allows the reader into the events of this sensitive time in his life through his words as well as the emotions he was feeling through his pictures. By getting rid of the necessary anthropomorphism that Spiegelman makes his readers perform throughout the rest of the novel, he breaks down a barrier that has existed between him and his reader by allowing them to fully witness a particularly vulnerable time in his life.

The panel begins with his mother lying naked in a bathtub, presumably dead, captioned with the words “menopausal depression” slanted on the bottom. The clearly inappropriate nature of a child imagining his mother naked and dead due to menopausal depression draws the reader into Spiegelman’s thoughts and his state of mind at the particularly sensitive time post his mother’s suicide. The next layer in the panel references his mother’s experiences in the Holocaust and the juxtaposition of the pile of dead bodies right under the single, dominating dead body of his mother draws a direct comparison to what Spiegelman clearly believes to be the cause of her death. Captioned with “Hitler did it!” (I.103, see Appendix D), the conclusions Spiegelman drew about his mother’s death could not be clearer. He thinks that everyone blames him, and he even blames himself, but he undeniably places part of the blame on history for her death. The next layer of the panel is the smallest, depicting his mother reading to him as a child dressed in a prisoner’s uniform with the caption “Mommy!” (I.103). This is Spiegelman’s lasting image of his mother, his last attempt to call out to her and connect with her after her death. This is an incredibly rare and intimate moment in Spiegelman’s own mind with his mother. His depiction of himself as a prisoner at such a young age shows just how much his parent’s past affects his own. The exploration of his past with his reader accompanying him and baring witness to the different stages of his thought process through this panel combines author and work, which in turn draws the reader to the author.

The final layer of the panel is the most emotionally charged for both reader and author. It depicts the final act of Spiegelman's mother, the slitting of her wrists. She holds the razor blade to her wrist with her tattoo from Auschwitz prominently displayed while an adult Spiegelman, still in a prisoner's uniform sits on the side, unable to watch his mother kill herself. This layer is captioned "Bitch", which is a dramatic change in tone from the layer before which cried out for his mother. In this slice, Spiegelman sees the culmination of the years of torture and depression, as symbolized by his mother's Auschwitz tattoo and the razor blade. He is unable to watch as a crucial part of his history, even though he often resents his mother, destroys itself. The word "bitch" further symbolizes how he blames not only himself and the Holocaust for his mother's suicide, but his mother herself.

Spiegelman not only builds walls between the reader and the story to save them from the trauma of the Holocaust, but also between the reader and himself in order to save them from the trauma of his own childhood. The Holocaust took something of magnitude away from those who experienced it, and this absence was transmitted to their children. Natan P. Kellermann, a clinical psychologist who specializes in Holocaust trauma, writes that Holocaust trauma can "fill their (the children of survivors') inner lives with terrible anxiety provoking associations" (69). Vladek never really discussed the Holocaust with his son, presumably because he felt the need to protect him from it, "I don't remember Vladek ever telling me much of anything when I was younger about what he went through" (Spiegelman, 14). Spiegelman feels this same moral responsibility when he distances the readers from

his work in order to spare them the trauma he felt that he experienced by growing up in the house of a survivor. This wall is present for the majority of the story, and only breaks down when Spiegelman discusses the suicide of his mother in which he uses human figures instead of mice. Spiegelman was not sheltered from the trauma of his mother's suicide so he feels no obligation to protect his readers from it by dehumanizing his characters as he does in the rest of the novel.

Spiegelman often conflates the trauma his father experienced with his own suffering. Being the child of Holocaust survivors impacted Spiegelman dramatically "the book seemed to loom over me like my father once did" (Metamaus, 8). The third chapter of *Maus II* is entitled "...And Here My Troubles Began". This chapter, which is the second to last one in the novel, is mainly a continuation of Vladek's story and is in fact where he contracts typhus and is sent to the infirmary and is subsequently liberated from Dachau. Although no place in a concentration camp was "safe," Eve Nussbaim Soumerai, a Holocaust survivor and author, "there were some benefits to life in the infirmary. It was not cold, there were few beatings, and the rules were less severe"(194). Prisoners often viewed the infirmary as a haven, with conditions superior to those in the regular camp. At this point in his life Vladek had been a prisoner of Dachau for over a year and the infirmary conditions should have been at the least a welcome respite.

Shortly after Vladek enters the infirmary, he describes how at the point when he was so desperate that "[he] could barely eat but [he] cut pieces to pay for help to go down to the toilet" (II.96), a German officer ordered everyone outside to line up

and “a real train to take passengers—a train for people [came]. It took [them] out from Dachau in the direction to Switzerland” (II.97-98). Liberation was the dream of everyone in a concentration camp and so this should have been the beginning of the end of Vladek’s troubles, and yet here Vladek was, in the process of being liberated and the second to last chapter is coined “...And Here My Troubles Began”. This is in fact the beginning of Vladek’s second life, of his time in America, his marriage to Spiegelman’s mother, and Spiegelman’s childhood. It seems as though the title of the chapter refers not to Vladek’s troubles but to Spiegelman’s own. Modern history’s most heinous crime had just concluded and yet Spiegelman views this as the beginning of his own troubles. The comedy that exists in this instance is exemplary of tension that Spiegelman deals with throughout both *Maus I* and *Maus II*. He succeeds in his attempt to portray his father’s suffering in a diplomatic way, and yet he often confuses his own darkness with that of his fathers.

The tension between horror and comedy that exists in *Maus* is evident throughout both *Maus I* and *Maus II*. Spiegelman struggles between maintaining an appropriate amount of respect for the events he is relaying and the comedic template that he chose to portray these events. Although the majority of the story is told in a linear fashion through the transmission of event from father to son, there are times when Spiegelman blurs the line between tragedy and a sort of dark humor. The panel after Vladek’s liberation from Dachau switches from Vladek’s past to Spiegelman and Vladek’s present in which they are on the way to the Bungalow’s in Upstate New York. On their way they drive past a black hitch-hiker and Vladek

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exclaims, "And-Oy-it's a *colored* guy, a shvartser! Push quick on the gas!" (II. 98, see Appendix E). This overt racism is comedic only in its juxtaposition to the racism Vladek himself experienced during his time at Dachau. Despite the seriousness of Holocaust literature, Spiegelman inserts this dark irony in keeping with the form of the graphic novel.

Spiegelman's usage of comedy to contrast the horrors of the Holocaust is evident in the pages proceeding the actual start to his novel. His epigraph page reads "The Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not human" (I.3) a quote attributed to Adolf Hitler, although the exact source is unclear. This is a meta-commentary on the usage of the animals as people in the *Maus* series. Spiegelman utilizes a quote from the man who murdered millions of people and targeted Jews in particular may seem to be a callous choice, and even offensive. However the fact that Spiegelman chooses to depict all of his characters, regardless of race, as animals mocks Hitler's comments. Spiegelman uses anti-Semitic images to ridicule anti-Semitism itself. The Polish people were also viewed as a lower class by the Germans and were often referred to as swine. Through giving Hitler more attention for his statements, Spiegelman's use of irony shows the absurdity of Hitler's words.

The dedication page in *Maus II* serves as a direct contrast to Spiegelman's use of Hitler's quote. He puts a real-life photograph of his deceased brother Richieu and writes "For Richieu and For Nadja" (II. 4, see Appendix F). Nadja is Spiegelman's daughter with his wife Francoise Mouly. By placing this human picture here he is directly contradicting Hitler's statement that the Jews are not human. The

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photograph of a human child killed by the Nazis makes it impossible to deny him, and by extension all Jews, his humanity. By dedicating the book to one child who is lost in the past and to another who still has a future, Spiegelman is connecting both his past and his present and recognizing that it is this that has created who he is today. There could not be a more clear or definitive way to refute Hitler's plan to destroy all of the Jews. By placing his book in between the tragic past of his family and the hopeful future, Spiegelman is making a bold statement about how far he and his people have come.

Despite Spiegelman's constant attempts to separate himself from his father's past, the scene in which he depicts his father's dream about liberation on Parshas Truma breaks down the barrier the Spiegelman himself has erected. In this panel Vladek describes how his dead grandfather came down to him while he was sleeping in Dachau and told him that he would be liberated on Parshas Truma. The following morning he asks a Rabbi in the camp what week Parshas Truma will be read on and the Rabbi answers that it will be read in three months from now. These two Holocaust-era panels are sandwiched by a present-day panel in which Vladek explains to Spiegelman how on "each week on Saturday we read a section from the Torah... This is so called—A parsha—and one week each year it is Parshas Truma" (1. 57). This page is a rare moment of connection between Spiegelman and his father as well as Spiegelman and his father's past.

Spiegelman's usage of animals as humans is one of the main barriers between himself and his father's story, as well as between his work and his reader.

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This barrier is eliminated on the Parshas Truma page where he draws his grandfather's hand more like a human being "rather than the little abstracted banana-bunch hands that figure elsewhere" (Spiegelman, 20, see Appendix G). These humanlike hands catch the reader's attention because they are so unlike the other hands drawn in the novel. This elimination proves to the reader that Spiegelman is aware of his religious roots even though religion was not at the forefront of his upbringing. Although Spiegelman is a self-proclaimed atheist and his father had lost most of his religious conviction after the war, the representation of this dream shows a respect towards Spiegelman's own religious history.

Not only does Spiegelman show respect to his father's history, this page represents a rare tender moment in the current day between father and son. Most of the pages in *Maus* are either fully dedicated to Vladek's Holocaust story or Spiegelman's current-day story, and when an interpolation of the other story is necessary in one of these pages, it is usually no more than one panel and is most often just text without a picture. The sandwiching of an entire strip of Spiegelman's current-day question and Vladek's answer between two strips of Holocaust story signify a moment of connection and understanding. Spiegelman is integrating himself into his father's story by asking a question about his religion, his heritage and receiving an answer.

The fact that Spiegelman treats a religious event with such respect is significant in light of his atheist views. The dream retains an otherworldly quality not just because of the human hands but also by the over-dramatization of his



grandfather as mouse. He depicts him as much hairier and larger than any other animal in the novel. The hand that comes down to tap Vladek and “wake” him during the dream is also drawn as larger than life. This contrast between his grandfather’s incredibly mouse-like face and his human hands as well as the proportionally larger figure create an air of mystery and respect surrounding this religious event, which connects Spiegelman to his past.

Although Spiegelman himself is “resistant to the notion of [his] work being dismissed or understood as a therapeutic exercise” (Spiegelman, 34), it is incredibly problematic to separate the author from his work. By inserting himself as a visible character rather than just a semi-anonymous narrator, Spiegelman forces the reader to consider the impact writing this novel had on him as an individual. It allowed him a space in which he could display his father how he saw him growing up—not a hero figure who survived the horrors of the Holocaust, but rather as a deeply troubled and often contradictory man who could not leave his past in the past. His father unwittingly transmitted some of the trauma he experienced onto his son and this book is easily read as a way for Spiegelman to cope.

However Spiegelman’s use of this novel as a coping mechanism does not explain why it has become so popular in American Holocaust culture. John Morreall, who is a Professor of Religious Studies at The College of William and Mary as well as the founder of the International Society for Humor Studies, published a paper entitled “Humor in the Holocaust: Its Critical, Cohesive, and Coping Functions” which argues that humor performed three main functions during the Holocaust. He

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contends that the "critical function focused attention on what was wrong and sparked resistance to it. [the Cohesive Function] created solidarity in those laughing together at the oppressors. And [the Coping function] helped the oppressed get through their suffering without going insane" (Morreall, 1). Perhaps these three reasons, which Morreall argues was how humor was used during the Holocaust, can also be applied to how Spiegelman uses humor in *Maus I* and *Maus II*. The critical function serves the same purpose in this generation as it did in the generation of the Holocaust. Students studying *Maus* can use the story told there and apply it to either injustices in their own lives or abuses they hear of occurring in other countries and stand up to them. A comic book is a more accessible medium through which readers, particularly younger ones, will be able to apply what they read and see to current-day scenarios. Using animals instead of people and pictures and words instead of just words helps the reader better understand the tragedy that occurred and therefore makes it more likely that they will rise up to prevent it in the future.

The second function, the Cohesive function of humor, can also be applied to *Is*, and in particular the classrooms of today. The fact that *Maus* is not just simply a story being told, but clearly has so many hidden layers of meaning and metaphor make it especially usable for discussion purposes. It allows for students to gather around a table and begin to discuss the Holocaust in a less threatening way which could create a discussion about the historical events that allowed this story to happen. Holocaust literature does not just occupy on purpose in education, but certainly one of the large ones is preventative knowledge. It is partially the

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responsibility of educators to teach the next generation how to prevent another genocide from coming about. The ability to foster discussion and create bonds between different groups of individuals is essential to ensuring "never again". The Coping function does not serve the grandchildren of Holocaust survivors but the children. Like Spiegelman, many children of Holocaust survivors experiences residual trauma as a result of their upbringing. *Maus* is a way for them to identify the experiences they had with others like them. The dark humor employed enables them to laugh at what they have gone through, instead of crying. All of these reasons are possibly contributors to why the *Maus* series has become such an integral part of American Holocaust culture.

Chapter two of *Maus II* begins with a meta-narrative entitled "Time Flies". In it Spiegelman depicts the process of writing *Maus II* and the characters all possess human bodies with animal masks visibly tied to the back of their heads. In the first four panels, Spiegelman is pictured at his desk with misplaced flies buzzing around him. He is slouched over as he explains how "in September 1986...the first part of *Maus* was published. It was a critical and commercial success" (42). In the final panel on the page Spiegelman and his desk are pictured atop a pile of emaciated, dead mouse bodies as he continues to expound upon the success of *Maus*, how he has "4 serious offers to turn my book into a T.V. special or movie (I don't wanna.)" It is now evident that the flies pictured in the top four panels are a result of the dead bodies that Spiegelman is sitting on. There is perhaps no more obvious display of the guilt that Spiegelman feels by publishing his father's story than this panel. The

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ending of "Time Flies" consists of Spiegelman's visit with his therapist where he ruminates on the tenuous relationship he had with his father and the pain and guilt that it caused him. He tells his therapist, "mainly I [Speigelman] remember ARGUING with him [Vladek] and being told I couldn't do anything as well as he could" (II.44). This includes the telling of his father's story. Even though Spiegelman wrote his book as a record of his conversations with his father, he still feels as though he has done his father's story an injustice simply because his father was not the one who actually wrote it. Spiegelman's guilt persists throughout both novels and influences almost everything he does.

The tension between Spiegelman and his father is only resolved when Vladek dies in 1982, prior to *Maus's* completion. The final image is of Vladek and Anja's tombstone, a fitting one for a book on the history of Spiegelman's father. Although Spiegleman never completely rectifies his relationship with his father, the book acts as a type of catharsis for Speigelman. It is a place where he has the ability to work through some of the trauma that he experienced being the child of Holocaust survivors through comedy. In doing so he often isolates his reader from his work, but there are key moments, such as *Prisoner on Hell Planet* and the beginning of "Time Flies", when Spiegelman lets his guard down and allows his readers to fully become one with him and his work.

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## Appendices:

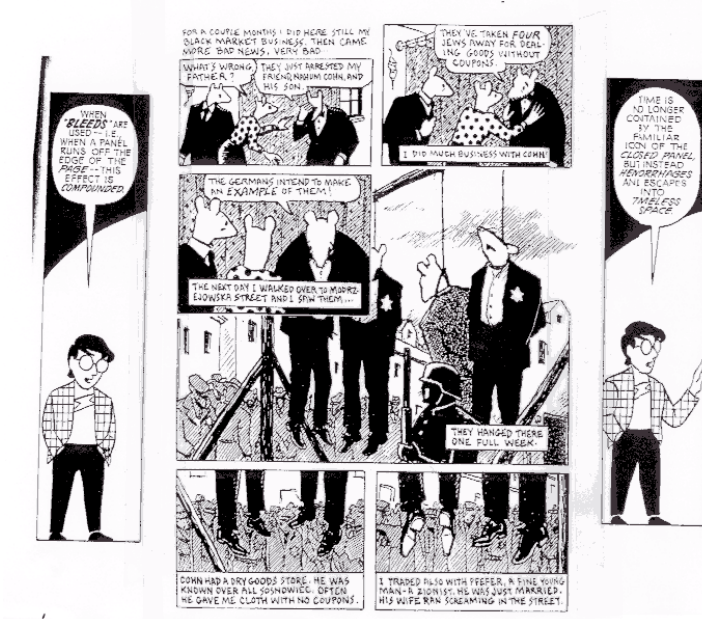
## Appendix A:



## Appendix B:



## Appendix C:



## Appendix D:





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from p.57 panels 1-3 of Spiegelman, Art. Maus: A Survivor's Tale, vol 1. New York: Pantheon Books, 1986.



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