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Abstract:

This is a critical essay on the Graphic novel “MAUS – a survivor’s tale” by art Spiegelman. Limiting this analysis to a particular theme would be extremely challenging for anyone that wishes to effectively convey the quintessence of the novel and the writing techniques that Art Spiegelman seems to follow. Spiegelman manoeuvres through heavy subject matters such as the horrors of the holocaust, racial injustice, the aftermath of the holocaust, survivors’ guilt, the eternal search for hope, and at the crux lies the undying love that his father (Vladek) has for his mother (Anja) that perseveres even during the dire circumstances that surround them until eternity.

Key words – holocaust, post-war trauma, Maus, survivor, family, death, love, rebuilding

The complete Maus is a graphic novel that follows the story of a man named Vladek, a survivor of the infamous holocaust who happens to be Art Spiegelman’s father. It’s safe to say that Maus is unlike any graphic novel one might ever read, although there are definitely thematic similarities between other books written during the holocaust like Anne Franke’s diary, films like -The pianist or accounts written after the war about the events that had occurred before 1945, Maus is characteristically different with the way that art chooses to maintain a nonlinear time setting. He seamlessly shifts from the present to the time his father was in the midst of the holocaust. Similar techniques can be observed in films like Sophie’s choice. As the story develops, we notice the gradual but deteriorating conditions for people that belonged to the Jewish community and simultaneously we also bare witness to the tormented relationship that Artie shares with his father (Vladek).

He does an impeccable job maintaining the seriousness of the holocaust while he writes the story in the format of a graphic novel. The depiction of Jews as mice, Germans as cats and poles as pigs is one of the most noticeable features that a reader will encounter. The animal imagery used by Spiegelman can be construed as a way to intensify the radical views that were held by the Germans. He portrays Jews as mice as a way to make sure that the reader understands the level of contempt and bigotry that was displayed by the Nazis who viewed Jews as “sub-human “. It is common knowledge that mice are merely useless in the eyes of a cat and are relentlessly hunted by cats. This establishes the attitude that the Germans had for Jews. The depiction of the polish as pigs can also convey the disdain that Jews had for the polish people due to the many instances in which they had betrayed the Jewish people by collaborating with the Germans.

During the genocide, it was understood that it was every man for himself although there were several instances of collaborations within the Jewish community and the resistance - Vladek’s cousin Piersis sheds light on the reality with a heart-breaking line - “we’re not cousins anymore. We’re just survivors, trying to survive”. This line encapsulates the dreadful state of affairs during the holocaust. It was a fight for survival and a fight against the erasure of the Jewish identity.

The holocaust changes a survivor forever– This statement is a poignant reminder of the after math of the holocaust. “It was nothing anymore there for us after the war. nothing” Vladek responds

when Artie questions Vladek's decision to leave Poland after the war. This was one of the major setbacks that holocaust survivors faced. The idea of home or any kind of livelihood before the holocaust was completely vanquished and the prospect of rebuilding a life from the rubble left thousands of survivors with no fixed abode. Survivors such as Vladek embark on a new battle that must be fought within themselves, an internal battle that involves the search for a home concurrently dealing with the grief and guilt that one experiences as a consequence of surviving the holocaust with each passing day serving as a reminder of the absence of a family member or friend.

We can also observe the growing pains in the relationship that Vladek and Artie share. We start to see the extreme paranoia and miserly ways that supersede any sort of normalcy that Vladek had going in his life. Vladek's penny-pinching behaviour is apparent when reader's come across instances in which he is described to be taking paper towels from public restrooms so he can avoid buying a tissue roll from the market. This might have been a trait that he inherently possessed but I would argue that this was a manifestation of the post war trauma due to the abject conditions of the holocaust and the lack of essential commodities that shaped him into the frugal individual that we see throughout the text. This also seems to be one of the vexing obstacles in Mala and Vladek's fractured relationship as Mala constantly voices her frustration on Vladek's disregard for her financial needs.

At several instances we see Artie deflecting conversations concerning Vladek's marital issues with Mala and doesn't seem to offer any concrete advice for his father rather grows impatient and is eager to work on the novel and learn more about the holocaust. Artie's relationship with his father seems quite forced at times as he shows tremendous indifference towards his father. He only wished to complete the novel and therefore had no choice but to engage in daily conversations with him. One can also infer that Artie decides to pursue a career as an artist in order to buck the conventional norms that Vladek believed in as well as avoid living in the shadow that his father seems to cast. At the same time, he contradicts himself as he expresses annoyance over his father's lack of interest for his work and subconsciously finds himself seeking approval from Vladek, at one particular instance he craves appreciation for the substantially low price he managed to bargain and pay for a tape recorder.

Artie's guilt can be understood or at the least broken down after reading the comic strip "prisoner on the hell planet". This particular chapter was radically different from the lucid story telling the rest of the book followed with the use of distorted faces, a meta story telling technique, a different setting and a darker undertone. Artie seems to be trapped in his own mind as he confronts the complex emotions of guilt and sadness on hell planet (his mind). Throughout the novel we understand that Artie's mother Anja was depressed and had mental illnesses that troubled her, her mental condition only worsened due to the isolation she felt during the holocaust. Artie can't help but blame himself for his mother's suicide. His mind tramples over the different possibilities that could answer the unexplainable question of "why she killed herself?" We can see that his relatives allude to the idea that it was his fault and his rebellious ways that led his mother to take her own life. We read phrases like "Hitler did it," "menopausal depression" and finally Artie brings up the last interaction he had with his mother over which he expresses immense regret. Anja asks "Artie do you still love me?" to which he responds "sure". His callous and unbothered response haunts him and he is overcome with guilt further blaming his mother for the condition of his mind and the emptiness he feels.

Another important aspect that art deals with is the writer's dilemma he faces with the choice to depict Maus as an unconventional comic strip manner along with the crippling self-doubt as he is

unsure of his capabilities as a writer. He believes that representing the reality of the holocaust as a comic strip is impractical and further has issues with visualising the events without misrepresenting the events that took place. He also finds himself in a conundrum as he faces issues with the idea of authenticity and is found doubting his ability to reconstruct stories from a past, he never lived or truly understood.

Many a times, revisiting the horrors of the holocaust is a painful journey for Vladek and it does feel like Vladek wishes to erase the memories he had from the time only to realise that the only way to attain a sense of freedom is by speaking the truth and by attesting to the tragic events that took place in Auswitz and other death camps as a way to pay homage to the victims that suffered the wrath of the agenda perpetuated by Nazis in Germany. The death of Anja and Vladek's son Richieu haunts the family and pictures of Richieu on the wall still remind Artie of the biological brother he had but never knew.

As a survivor of the holocaust, it is obvious that Vladek is a conflicted man who is deeply troubled by his circumstances but this doesn't exonerate him from certain racial prejudices he holds against the black community which come to light when Artie stops his car to give an African American hitchhiker a ride. Artie doesn't hold back in calling out his father's hypocrisy and condemns the prejudiced statements his father makes but his father dismisses and avoids the conversation.

Artie, a survivor's child and Vladek a survivor of the holocaust narrate their lives nuanced by the consequences of their individual realities. Vladek embarks on his journey through life along with the unspoken burden that exists as a survivor, the pair work in unison to unflinchingly deliver the truth and reality of the holocaust and as the famous saying goes "dead men tell no tales", which signifies that Artie and Vladek work as liaisons in order to try and connect the bridge between the countless experiences of the dead holocaust victims and the tales from the survivor's by detailing the shared tragedy of the holocaust.

Now, we live in a brave new world. After nearly 70 years of the tragic events that took place in Europe, anti-Semitism still exists and religious persecutions across various communities still take place around the globe. We can only hope that our awareness of history and our knowledge pertaining to the horrors of war and mass genocide will and help us realise that the consequences of brutal events such as these leave scars and irreplaceable voids that take a lifetime to heal.

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