

“Narrating Holocaust Pain in Art Spiegelman’s Graphic Novel *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale*”

Varsha S¹ II MA English Literature
Department of English, PSG College of Arts & Science,
Coimbatore- 14, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

This article explores the narrative as well as visual dimensions of Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, which highlights how the graphic novel reshapes historical representation through storytelling and illustration, and it also examines the novel’s visual narrative strategies of the Holocaust. The novel traces the Holocaust survival story of Spiegelman’s father. The author uses animal allegory, with Cats for Nazis and Mice for Jews, told through black-and-white illustrations. The author mixes his own story, personal testimony, and striking visuals to show readers just how powerful the graphic novel can be in rebuilding history and confronting trauma. This paper proves that *Maus* shows the power of storytelling as a narrative method to reconstruct Holocaust history and transmit inherited memory and history illustrated in the novel. How does Art Spiegelman use narrative and visual strategies to reconstruct Holocaust history through graphic storytelling, connecting readers with a clear understanding?

Keywords: Holocaust, storytelling, War, Family, Survival and Visual Narration

“*Maus: A Survivor’s Tale*” by Art Spiegelman was published in the 1980s in the author’s comic magazine, *Raw*, before being published as two books in 1986 and 1991. It is the first graphic novel to win the Pulitzer Prize, not only for its subject matter but also for its form and its place in Holocaust literature. Later in 2003, the author combined both volumes into “*The Complete Maus*”. This novel tells the story of Artie’s father’s experiences during the Holocaust. The story unfolds through two timelines. This comic novel also investigates the emotional and narrative tensions between father and son. The materials were taken from a series of conversations that Spiegelman had with his father, Vladek Spiegelman, in 1972, and this novel stands as an achievement in literature, still now showing how the graphic novel can serve as a powerful storytelling medium in today’s world. By bringing words and images together, the author captures the horrors of the Holocaust in a way that is both accessible and deeply moving. One example includes *Maus* being placed on ‘The New York Times’ best-seller list for fiction literature, which Spiegelman protested against, whereupon it was moved to the non-fiction bestseller list (Chute,2008,p 457). This might also be because the characters are not human but anthropomorphic animals, and these animals are given human features and abilities; portraying the Jews as mice, the Germans as cats, the Poles as pigs and the Americans as dogs, as well as brief encounters with Swedish deer and a French frog (Spiegelman,2003, pp. 253, 272).

Marie Laure Rayn, work “*Narrative Across Media: The Languages of Storytelling*, in which Jeanne Ewert says that the graphic novel poses unique challenges to narratology because they combine verbal (texts) and visual (images) storytelling. “*The Complete Maus: A Survivor’s Tale*” by Art Spiegelman shows how pictorial and graphic elements are not just illustrations but also essential narrative compounds. The visual grid and the comic’s panel structure strongly shape Storytelling. Robert Harvey, a Critic and Cartoonist, argues that literary critics usually focus on plot, character, and theme, ignoring how images function narratively in comic work. Before the work, *Maus* comics were often seen as entertainment mainly for children; however, the author demonstrated that graphic narratives could also

tackle complex themes such as memory, trauma, identity, and historical duty, as shown in the novel. It also lets readers see what happened in the past through pictures and stories. When it comes to pictures, readers have a stronger connection and understanding than with a traditional one, which often fails to convey meaning and ideas.

In an interview, Spiegelman noted that graphic narratives are uniquely suited to this function, since “a comic strip is made up of units of time placed next to each other so that one sees past and present simultaneously, before decoding the moments that are being depicted in any box”. The author depicts the scene in which young Artie cries in front of his father after being ridiculed by his friends. Vladek doesn't comfort the child. Instead, he turns that moment into a lesson rooted in his own trauma, which is the Holocaust, and what he has experienced in Poland with his family. The author's father questions the idea of friendship and emotional pain, measuring the child's hurt against the horrors he endured during the Holocaust. When Spiegelman decided to write about his father's experience in Auschwitz by using a graphic novel as a medium to show how much all this affected people's lives during that time, he brought out the importance of the incident during the Second World War. There are many movies, fiction and non-fiction novels, textbooks, and other ways of telling about the horrors of the Holocaust, but Spiegelman drew those horrors in a graphic novel. Art Spiegelman himself states in an interview with the BBC channel that he never considered removing Art from the story, since making himself an objective lens would conflict with the narcissism of knowing the world through only his eyes.

The author chose animals like Jews as mice, Germans as cats, Americans as dogs, Poles as pigs, and the French as frogs to represent how people treated others during that time. Spiegelman, being the first illustrator to use animals to show cultural differences in his novel *Maus*, shows not just the horror of what Vladek Spiegelman experienced in Poland, but also how that endurance reshaped him during the Holocaust. Spiegelman further exploits the graphic novel as a medium to express emotion through the characters' eyebrows or dark circles under their eyes. For example, when Tosha learns that the Germans are clearing out the ghetto that she is staying in with, among others, including Vladek's and Anja's son, Richieu. In the three frames, Tosha's emotions are conveyed through dark circles under her eyes and her frowning eyebrows. The cartoon convention of sweat pearls often representing stress, expressing her imminent fear of being taken away by the Gestapo, leading to her killing herself and the three children in her care (Spiegelman, 2003, p. 111) it evident that Tosha, as she was crushed by fear and hopelessness, believed she could no longer protect or care for the children along with Richieu during the Holocaust. The choice of a graphic novel over a traditional novel is because of the images and visuals that can be easily understood by the audience or the reader, which actually connect more than traditional text.

Spiegelman further exploits the graphic novel medium's conventions when expressing emotion through the dark circles under the characters' eyes. By framing human suffering and violence through animal imagery, the author brings the familiar narratives and compels readers to see those horrifying events. Art Spiegelman himself is a character to see how the struggles of his father's incident and also to honour his mother's memory, as she committed suicide, which was shocking for his father and Artie. In this layered narrative, the Holocaust is not a single story, and we can see how his life changes from a peaceful time in Poland to the fear and danger of Nazi rule because so many people have died and lost their families, too. Vladek is now sent to Auschwitz every day because of the nazis people to fight and to stay alive in Auschwitz. Characters like Mandelbaum and Mr Ilzecki, and more fellow Jews, navigate the terror of occupied Poland, offering glimpses into the varied strategies of endurance, some hope to Spiegelman in the novel. Through all these characters, Anja Ilzecki and many others, Spiegelman paints a mosaic of human responses to resilience, despair, compromise, and courage that they experienced during the war in Poland.

This novel shows how Artie's struggles to represent his father's story ethically mirror the challenges of representing lives with dignity and truth. Artie shows how deeply he is affected by the trauma passed down from his parents, Vladek, who survived the Holocaust. His father, Vladek, shares painful, often repressed memories of survival during the Holocaust. A photo of Artie's late brother, Richieu, who died during the war, serves as a constant reminder of loss for Vladek Spiegelman, showing how they have suffered, and his mother's suicide leaves a lasting emotional scar. The story moves back and forth between Vladek's experiences during the Holocaust and Art's current efforts to capture those stories, revealing how painful pasts don't fit into simple retellings. Instead of direct depiction, Art Spiegelman represents Jews as mice, Nazis as cats, using animal allegory figures to probe ideas about who we are and how we're seen. Because he appears in the book himself, writing it, the narrative draws attention to its own construction. The author He is always in the shadow of his deceased brother, Richieu like one who died during the war, whose elder brother of as he known only through the photography which is actually ideal untouchable figure where the author struggles good survivors killed for having a normal life and and also feels he can never complete his parents dramatic past what they went through during the Holocaust which make the parents even more suffer than in struggling of World War II

Maus, a survivor's tale by Art Spiegelman, as an adult, recounting his father's struggles and his suffering in surviving the Holocaust. *Maus* also invites readers to feel deeply by showing the complex, imperfect humanity of its characters, especially Vladek's painful memories and Art's struggle to understand what he went through in the Holocaust. Through powerful visuals, Spiegelman uses animals to represent people's characters, employing broken-panel layouts, suffering, and stark black-and-white illustrations. Jeanne Ewert's analysis of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*: every image conveys some narrative because it attributes within every single frame, which implies some degree of caution. Her engagement with the material is like a section that, as a whole highly informative in terms of illustrating the narrative potential of visual art for both the images as well as for the wider field of narratology by exposing the difference between the image and another narrative form, where it is skillfully offers multiple perspective of the narrative capacity of a single picture in the novel. Just like Vladek in the novel lived and experienced through war and fear, many Palestinians people today are also living in constant danger. Even after a ceasefire was announced in Palestine, the violence continued in Gaza, killing multiple people. Bombings and shootings have taken the lives of people's families and children, nearly a hundred people are dying every single bomb blast and shooting. People are still struggling to live in Gaza and are unable to survive with their families and children in Palestine. This reminds us of Vladek's time in Auschwitz, where every day was a fight to stay alive, as Vladek and his wife Anja went through.

Maus shows how the Holocaust affected not only those who lived through it but also the next generations. The story teaches the readers that remembering these important events, which happened in Poland, as the effects of trauma can last a lifetime, and this *Maus*, a survivor's tale, reminds readers of the strength of the human spirit and the importance of never forgetting the lessons of history, what people have experienced and it explores how stories address moral issues, particularly those related to past horrors. Through this style, history and personal experience come together in one rich account. This deep loss and the erasure of memory are similar to what Artie and Vladek experience in the novel, where Art Spiegelman tries to hold on to the past and present as they unfold.

Just like *Maus*, Art Spiegelman uses storytelling to keep memories alive for the readers, Palestinians and their supporters are using protests and media to demand justice for their loss of families and children and make sure the world doesn't forget what's happening in Palestine. The characters are displayed as anthropomorphic animals Jews as mice, and Germans as cats, creating an immediate metaphorical effect, and the author makes use of conventions known from cartoon drawings to create emotions, thus using the graphic narrative to underline the verbal in the novel. The ending of *Maus*, with its fragmented closure and focus on memory, serves as a timeless reminder that the consequences of

systemic violence extend far beyond immediate survival. It is also compared with the contemporary incidents of genocide, war, and displacement. By inserting himself into the narrative, Spiegelman exposes the difficulty and responsibility of retelling another's suffering.

References

1. Spiegelman, A.(2003). *The Complete Maus*. Penguin
2. Ewert, J. C.(2000). *Reading Visual Narrative: Art Spiegelman's Maus*. *Narrative* 8(1) 87-103.
3. Harvey, R. C.(1996). *The Art of the Comic Book: An Aesthetic History*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
4. The Narrative of Trauma in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. (n.d). *ResearchGate*,www.researchgate.net/publication/379011317_The_Narrative_of_Trauma_in_Art_Spiegelman's_Maus.
5. Chute, H.(2008). Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative. *PMLA*, 123(2),452-465.
6. Ryan, M.-L. (Ed.). (2004). *Narrative across media: The languages of storytelling*. University of Nebraska Press.

Copyright & License:

© Authors retain the copyright of this article. This work is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), permitting unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.