
Maus By Art Spiegelman: Representation Of Historical Reality Of The Holocaust In Illustrations

By combining words with pictures, graphic novel Maus fully utilizes iconic illustrations to unveil a historical reality of the Holocaust. In field of comics, an icon refers to “any image used to represent a person, place, thing, or idea”. In Maus, Spiegelman has developed a series of anthropomorphic images, or icons, to represent racial groups involved in Holocaust. Spiegelman’s decision to adopt what appear to be universal representations as icons for major characters, thus, prompts an important question: in what ways is the Holocaust best represented by Spiegelman’s anthropomorphic icons of racial groups as mice, cats, and pigs?

With the use of animal icons, Spiegelman not only establishes an identifiable image of the racial groups involved in the Holocaust but also provides an emotional protection for the readers by depicting dreadful situations in a simplified manner. In the third frame of page 33 in Maus, Spiegelman presents two mice holding a sign that reads “I am a filthy Jew. ” Through this, reader can immediately recognize how the Jews are characterized as animal mice. The other major racial group, German Nazi, is illustrated in the same panel as a group of cats with sharp eyes and teeth. In following panels, readers can see cats in Nazi uniforms cudgeling crying mice with Billy club and suffocating the small mice with their claws. Spiegelman further highlights the overwhelming and ubiquitous German authority over the Jews by setting the symbol of Swastika as the background of the frames. Indeed, these obtrusive and blunt depictions of extermination of the Jews may cause discomfort if the characters were drawn as real humans. Nevertheless, because Spiegelman’s animal icons appropriately distance us from the painful and serious agony of the Holocaust, they unveil the significant details of the tragedy without inflicting emotional disturbance on the readers.

Spiegelman’s usage of simplified icons is not solely limited to representations of the two major opposing groups involved in the Holocaust but also extended to demonstrate Polish people’s ambiguous stance during the Holocaust in Vladek’s perspective. Even though Mr. Lukowski, the Polish janitor in Vladek’s father’s old house, provides Vladek and Anja a temporary shelter, not all Poles were voluntarily supportive for Jew’s survival. For instance, while Vladek is relieved to see how there still exist “some kind people”, one furious pig curses them out from window and shouts, “There’s a Jews in the courtyard! Police!” Later in the story, readers can continue to witness how the Poles show much more concerns for their own safety, and help Vladek and Anja merely for money. Because Art is depicting the Poles based on his father’s words, such depictions of Poles’ actions in Maus clearly reflects Vladek’s bitterness towards the Poles. As a comic is an “empty shell” where us readers can pull ourselves into the cartoon,

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP

unfriendly pigs successfully serve to delineate Vladek's impression of Poles during the Holocaust.

With iconic representations of the social groups in Vladek's account, Spiegelman further reflects the rampant racism during the Holocaust, which reduced the entire race into one filthy horde predestined for elimination. In the last frame of page 33, the readers must rely on the words spoken by each of the mice to identify the group of mice as individual speakers. Similarly, in page 137, because none of the Polish pigs display distinctive facial features, we need to account for clothing, speech bubbles and the actions carried out by the pigs to distinguish an "old witch" from Mr. Lukowski. Moreover, since different human races are uniformly presented as one animal group, one race can disguise themselves to be other race by using animal masks. For instance, in page 137, readers can see how Vladek and Anja are wearing pig masks to pretend themselves as Poles. This showcases how the Jews had to withdraw their national identity for their survival, and thereby, allows the readers to once again explore the deeply rooted racism in the context of the Holocaust. Therefore, "amplification through simplification" is achieved by Spiegelman, as he uses the iconic animals to highlight how human race was the only reducible characteristic that people used to recognize others during the Holocaust.

Animal icons in Maus also alludes to dehumanization of people involved in the Holocaust, that people are generally desensitized towards the ferocity of annihilation and lost their self-awareness as humans due to their prolonged exposure to brutal subjection. Throughout the graphic novel, mice, cats, and pigs in Maus are not aware of the fact that they represent Jews, Nazis, or Poles. Despite all the characters walk with two feet, eat human food, and conduct verbal communications, they are physically depicted as animals. In page 147, however, Anja freaks out at small rats, shouting "Th-There are rats down here!". In order to draw a clear distinction between real animals and anthropomorphized characters, Spiegelman presents a realistic sketch of a rat, juxtaposing it with Vladek and Anja. Though it seems ironic, this frame clearly exemplifies that the members of the oppressed social group are unaware of how they are regarded as mice by oppressing powers and vice versa. Indeed, Nazis soldiers' ruthless, cruel, and nasty exploitation of the Jews remind the readers of real beasts.

The powerless Jews' absolute compliance with the Nazi's devastating violence also mirrors them as filthy animals. Likewise, animal icons in the context of Holocaust straightforwardly translate how the severe racism was manifested in form of dehumanization and blinded the people's self-awareness as humans. While Spiegelman's anthropomorphic icons generally resonate back to the social hierarchy during the Holocaust and the food chain associated with those animals, such demonstration is limited by its universality. Spiegelman's cat-mouse food chain metaphor derives exclusively from American context, despite the general audience of this graphic novel is not limited to Western culture. Polish representation with pig icon is even more debatable as pigs are not natural enemies of cats nor mice. Moreover, while Western culture

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP

generally cast negative light on pigs by associating them with laziness and uncleanness, many people from Asian culture associate pigs with wealth and luck. In this sense, different symbolic meanings that an animal pig carry illustrate different attitude displayed by different Poles, and their general involvement as neither major victims nor tormentors during the Holocaust. Nevertheless, because Maus is created based on Vladek's personal account, Vladek exposes biased animosity towards the Poles by depicting his uncomfortable personal enouncements with Poles. Likewise, while icons should contribute to the readers' universal identification of the cartoon, Spiegelman's animal representation lacks universality.

To conclude, Spiegelman doesn't use his animal figures simply to suggest that all the Germans are inherently evil and all Jews are powerless. Instead, animal icons in Maus establish a clear picture of the relationship between oppressing and oppressed social groups during the Holocaust, translate the indirect engagement of the third party from the survivor's perspective, render profound insight into Nazi's racial prejudice against the Jews, and illustrate the awful consequence of prolonged tragedy. Spiegelman's overt incorporation of iconic animals, thus, enhances the readers' understanding of the reality of the Holocaust and effectively uncovers the tragedy of World War II.

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

[GET HELP](#)