Maus: A Story Of A Holocaust Survivor

Art Spiegelman’s Pulitzer-winning duology ‘Maus’ tells the story of a Holocaust survivor, in particular the memoir of Vladek Spiegelman, a Jewish survivor of Hitler's Europe, and his son, a cartoonist coming to terms with his father's story. As a graphic novel, ‘Maus’ is able to shock the reader and ‘draw[s] us closer to the bleak heart of the Holocaust' (The New York Times). This genre can be described as a “narrative work in which the story is conveyed using sequential art in a traditional comics format.” Spiegelman’s work is noticed to follow the conventions of a graphic novel: the implementation of anthropomorphically depicted animals, sequentially aligned panels and the use of ‘speech bubbles.’ The facial expressions of every anthropomorphized character add to the unfolding story pose as an important aspect of the work. However, the topic of this graphic novel is very unusual, focusing on the sombre and sinister events of the Holocaust. Maus is a postmodernist text, on the surface it is a graphic novel with conventions of that text style, but beyond that it is a pastiche of many other genres, including ideas of both biographical and autobiographical texts.

One very commonly utilised literary device throughout graphic novels is anthropomorphism, defined as the attribution of human characteristics such as emotions, traits or intentions to a non-human entity, most commonly animals. Spiegelman’s implementation of such a literary device justifies the ability to display the strata and hierarchy of animals in relation to social context – the Jews as mice, the lowest mammals, the Germans and Nazis as cats, and then the Americans as dogs at the top order of this hierarchy. The graphic novel displays Vladek Spiegelman “running” from the Nazis throughout the duration of his memoir. This idea coincides with the ‘cat-and-mouse’ metaphor identified between the survivors – the Jews, and their villains/’the big cat’ – the German Nazi. The element of villains and heroes is a widespread technique utilised by graphic novelists, allowing the clear portrayal of the protagonist and the antagonist(s). Another noticeable justification for the anthropomorphizing of characters is to express their emotions, facial expressions and feelings, referred to as enemata. By using the heads and faces of animals, the reader is able to characterise a persona immediately. The reader usually characterises animals with specific feelings or ideas, for example, the mice are drawn as anxious and distressed, as Art claims ‘it is [important] to represent Jews…the prey of Nazis, as vulnerable, victimised species.’ Whilst Spiegelman utilises enemata on every page of his graphic novel, a significant example spans across the first two panels on page 82, where numerous defenceless, innocent mice being seriously abused, if not killed by their enemies, the ‘cats’. Usually, the Jews in distress are pictured with their face pointing up in order for the open mouth to be seen. These facial expressions clearly signify the traumatic experiences that occurred in the concentration camps. Another important justification for the use of animals rather than humans in Maus, is due to Spiegelman assigning stereotyping elements and identities to certain animals, allowing their simple identifications. Thus, the reader can identify any role allocations instantly, while human characters would make it much more difficult to understand the social status. In addition, Spiegelman claims the use of animal characters is “a way to keep distance to the very personal story” of the terror of the Holocaust.

However, the implementation of anthropomorphized characters could be seen as inappropriate to depict such a serious, gruelling subject. This poses a differentiation from the graphic novel genre as most texts of this style do not focus on such serious historical matters, where millions

of people lost their lives. ‘Maus’ focuses on the terrifying subject of the Holocaust, in particular the demoralising concentration camps through the story of a fortunate survivor. This graphic novel focuses on true, real-life historical events which occurred in the midst of the 20th century. This is a point of differentiation from the genre, as a common characteristic is a fictional plot with ‘imaginary characters’, not based on history or facts. There are numerous graphic novels, such as cartoons and non-factual texts which follow a dark or sombre plot. However, Art Spiegelman’s text boldly separates itself from the others, as even though no graphic illustrations are displayed, the reader is immersed in the horror and traumatic experiences of Nazi Germany. Moments such as ‘they would shoot me for running away if I got my cap’, or the seventh frame on page 239 claiming the Jews had ‘hanged for a long time’ show the indescribable conditions the innocent “mice” had to withstand.

‘Maus’ is most widely labelled as a graphic novel, however particular features are suggestive of other text styles, a pastiche, including traces of biographical and autobiographical writing. In ‘Maus’, Spiegelman utilises visual techniques to allow his reader to see the blurring of two different stories: Artie’s observing his father’s story, and Vladek’s Holocaust recount itself. However, the graphic novel poses a complex ‘survivor’s tale’, about the survival of the Jewish genocide. However, a palimpsest can be noticed through the superimposing of the two stories. One is not sufficient without the other. What occurs is that Artie is a presence in Vladek’s biographical memoir, assisting him in the relaying of particular information. This is in hand with the factual justifications posed throughout the text, through the non-illustrated images, photographs, posed on pages 102,165 and 294. These photographs contradict the countless cartoon illustrations as a sense of realism, showing that this story is nothing less than factual. This addition allows the reader to appreciate that the novel is a non-fictional biography.

The intertextuality within ‘Maus’ is another justification of the factual elements, which pose unusual to a graphic novel. ‘Prisoner on the Hell Planet’, is a short comic book covering the events of Artie’s mother's suicide. The work is illustrated in a German Expressionist manner, juxtaposed as an addition to his main work ‘Maus’, which uses animals as its main form of characters. It deviates from the conventions of anthropomorphism, as well as a graphic novel. Spiegelman utilises humans, contrary to the use of animals throughout the text. Its darker, shaded background of panels alerts the reader of a sombre moment. The use of human faces and feelings is able to portray Artie’s true emotions, how much Anja really meant to him.

Art Spiegelman’s memoir ‘Maus’ and its focus on the anguish and pain of the Holocaust is seen to conform with graphic novel characteristics through its rich implementation of anthropomorphized characters. A widespread commonality in such text types, Spiegelman is able to show social groups in their correlation to the animal hierarchy, emphasised by the ‘cat and mouse’ situation between the Jews and the Nazi Germans. However, focusing on a bitter, sombre topic such as World War II creates a sense of deviation away from a typical graphic novel text. Such a factually rich text, along with the photographs and implementation of his earlier comic work ‘Prisoner on the Hell Planet’, Spiegelman is able to demonstrate the importance of such truthful memoir; such a historical event cannot be avoided. It is through this element that the text is seen to differentiate between two genres, in particular the graphic novel and the biographical writing style.