

# Analysis of Animal Image in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*

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The visual metaphors of cats for Germans, mice for Jews, pigs for Poles, dogs for Americans make the story compelling without any extraneous description. In this paper, I explore the animal images in *Maus*, the mice, the cats and the pigs. By stating the chosen of mice image, symbolic meaning of mice and the function of "masks" that mice put on to pretend to be others, we explore the universally acknowledged metaphor mice in *Maus* and interpret the miserable history of Nazi Holocaust.

*Keywords:* animal image, metaphor, *Maus*

Animal images in literary works is artificially related to animal's external manifestations and internal essence, including the animal's appearance, posture, facial features as well as the animal's character traits and spiritual temperament. People's cognition of animal images and the formation of animal conception are inevitably influenced by the social and cultural context. Being a Jewish descent brought up in America, Art inherits both Jewish and American culture. His work *Maus* is an autobiographical graphic novel narrates the history of Holocaust. Based on two-line structure, *Maus* tells readers what happened between "I" and my father at present, while showing readers the dark and cruel living situation of Jews during the World War II.

## Mice—Jewish as Victims

In the graphic narration of *Maus*, Spiegelman imposes mice as a metaphor on all Jews. Mice are regarded as vermin by humans being which people try every means to exterminated. During the World War II, the Jews lived in an abyss of misery, just like mice in the dark ditch, being despised and disgusted. They were either piled up and killed in the mass shooting by German Nazis, or lived in fear and agitation, hid all the time in order to avoid the arrest and torture of the Nazis. In order to get food to survive, they had to risk their lives to trade on the black market. Some Jews would dig a hole in the ground as a hiding place and live just like mice to avoid being captured by the German Nazis. In the portrait of *Maus*, the adult mice are barricaded in Auschwitz Concentration Camp to do hard labor, the weak or the sick are sent to gas chambers or crematoriums and then end their lives. Even the crying little mice will be directly killed without any hesitation. The image of the mice here is not only a symbol of the Jews as victim during the World War II, but also a reflection of their living conditions and status. Jews can only live in the dark, filthy and slaughtered cages, with no dignity, no personality, and no right. Facing the ferocious and brutal Nazis, they were like mice to cats, allowing them to tease, beat and even kill.

### **Mice—Jewish Ethical Group**

In image processing, the author weakens the features of each character, so that each mouse presents a more similar facial image. This similar processing endows a generalization of the image after retaining the main features. The specific individual images of the persecuted Jews have been replaced by a unified image of rats. All we can see are the faces of rats depicted by the dots and lines. The rough lines and expressionless images of mice are the record of the dazed, miserable, helpless and tragic situation of the Jewish collective.

With regard to the creation of *Maus*, Art has noted:

All kinds of elisions and ellipses and compressions are a part of any shaped work, and my goal was to not betray what I could find out or what I had heard or what I knew but to give a shape to it. But giving shape also involves, by definition, the risk of distorting the underlying reality. Perhaps the only honest way to present such material is to say: "Here are all the documents I used, and here's like thousands of hours of tape recording, and here's a bunch of photographs to look at. Now, go make yourself a *Maus*!"

The homogenous visualization of the group identities of animal species is a satire by Spiegelman's sophisticated visual narrative strategy to Hitler's categorizations of human beings by race and nationality. Spiegelman intentionally effaces individual differences in the similar fashion as Hitler did to the Jews. Visually, the obscure individual identity makes distinct the group differences, implying that the Nazi party as a collective image commit the atrocity in the Holocaust. In this way, *Maus* is more than a story of individual but stands for a part of Jewish history.

### **Mice—Covered in Masks**

In people's cognition, cats are often the nemesis of mice. This highlights the contradictory relationship between Jews and German Nazis. If we say Jews are "victims", then Nazis are "oppressor". For the German Nazis, they arrested or massacred Jews during World War II, eager to eradicate all the Jews in the world. In *Maus*, cats are depicted as dangerous and fierce. Both the German soldier in steel helmets and the German civilians are all vicious, they are open mouthed, with point teeth and matted hair and whiskers, as if ready to pounce on its prey at any time. Spiegelman replaces the individual images of the German Nazis with the unified evil cat image. By adopting this, the overall identity and characteristics of the Germans become more clear. The executioners who organize and plan to exterminate the entire Jewish nation driven by Hitler's ethnography.

The image of pigs constructs the identity of another ethnic group—Polish people. Pigs often appear as lazy, stupid and greedy. Art uses the image of pigs show the characteristics of Poles to a certain extent. The Polish tutor turns away the Vladek family although they used to be very close. The Polish escapee who deceived and betrayed Vladek and Anja, leading them captured by the German Nazis and thrown into Auschwitz Camp. In Auschwitz, the Polish prison chiefs would persecute Jews more cruelly than the German Nazis. This group, on the one hand, was oppressed and persecuted by the German Nazis, on the other hand, they became the accomplice in the crime. Their existence made the fate of the Jews even more tragic and helpless, adding a thicker stroke to that dark history.

Within the narrative of *Maus*, the Jews actively attempt to cover up their identity, they are presented as characters wearing pig masks to pass for non-Jewish Poles, as a graphic representation of their struggle to stand apart from their own identity. The Jews eagerly seek for a safe persona: that of the privileged Pole, not the

oppressed Jew. While the disguise in *Maus* usually includes a form of dress, it is through the metaphorical mask device alone that readers recognize a character in disguise.

In the scene where Vladek, passing as a Pole, meets up with a disguised Jew in Sosnowiec, the panels are framed in such a way that the other characters' true identity are at first concealed from readers. The left-hand panel borders crop the "pig's" face so that, in not allowing us full view of the character's face, the readers might not see the mask device. Only when he identifies himself as a Jew are we allowed to see the mask in place—only then do we as readers learn that the other man, like Vladek, is in the process of standing outside his true self.

By drawing all of the characters as masked humans, Spiegelman makes a move to somehow universalize, or at least compartmentalize, his experience, yet that very act of compartmentalization is itself inauthentic.

### Conclusion

Vladek assumes a mouse identity, imposes that metaphor on all Jews, even Art himself as a character in *Maus* within the main narrative. However, it seems that Spiegelman wants to ask us the authenticity of the metaphors. The very title of this chapter is significant in this respect. The previous chapter is entitled playfully punning on the mouse metaphor. In the narrative, the characters use the real name of place, Auschwitz. For this, where the weight of the past comes crashing into the present, the metaphors' limits are exploded, and linguistic puns seem no longer fitting to the tone. "*Mauschitz*" becomes "*Auschiwits*": no mistaking metaphors—Jews are Jews, not mice, the camp is "*Auschiwitz*": not clearly titled stand in. When the mask becomes clearly a metaphor, the truth behind it shines more clearly.

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