

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

Maus I & II

by Art Spiegelman

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Notes

Portions of *Maus I* first appeared in *Raw*, a cutting-edge “comix” journal that Art Spiegelman founded with his wife, Francoise Mouly. *Maus I* was published in book form in 1986. After releasing *Maus II* in 1991, Spiegelman became the first person to receive a Pulitzer Prize for a book-length comic. As of early 2004, he remains the only one to have done so.

The appearance of *Maus I & II* stood the comic book form on its head, asserting that comics could be used to great effect to approach the gravest of subjects. Other graphic artists have since used the medium to explore issues of politics and warfare, most notably Joe Sacco in *Palestine* and *Safe Area Gorazde: The War in Eastern Bosnia* and Marjane Satrapi in *Persepolis*. The two-volume *Maus*, however, remains the benchmark by which all other work in the field is measured.

The writing and art in *Maus* are intricate and bursting with intention intensity, and emotion, making *Maus* a great entrance into classroom discussions of craft and the choices artists and writers make.

In studying *Maus*, many readers will be encountering metafiction for the first time. It will be important—especially when approaching the second volume—to point out the difference between “Artie,” the character, and Art Spiegelman, the author.

All references come from the 1986 Pantheon paperback edition of *Maus I: My Father Bleeds History* and the 1991 Pantheon paperback edition of *Maus II: And Here My Troubles Began*.

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. define the vocabulary words listed in the study guide.
2. define and point out examples in *Maus I* and/or *Maus II* of
 - frame narrative
 - symbolism
 - metaphor
 - metafiction
 - comic relief
 - irony
 - foreshadowing
 - catachresis
 - parallelism
 - mixed metaphor
 - dialect
 - pun
 - epigraph
 - litotes
 - paradox
 - juxtaposition
3. identify Vladek's chief motivations and describe the ways in which they help him to survive.
4. evaluate the effectiveness and aptness of Spiegelman's "cat and mouse" metaphor in *Maus*.
5. point out instances in the text of the use of artistic deviations to emphasize or parallel the emotional content of the story.
6. demonstrate a basic knowledge of the progression of Nazi actions against Polish Jews during World War II, beginning with the setting of curfews and ending at the concentration camps.
7. assess Spiegelman's decision to weave the stories of the young and the elderly Vladek together rather than telling them separately.
8. understand the limitations of comics or any other form of writing or art to represent historical reality without distortion.
9. understand the concept of "craft" and intentional choice in composition and notice these when approaching a creative work.

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Discuss the effectiveness of the frequent movement from the story of the young Vladek and the Holocaust to the story of the elderly Vladek and his relationship with Artie (and back). Would the story of the young Vladek have more emotional weight if Spiegelman had decided to tell it in one uninterrupted piece? Defend your answer.
2. Discuss the usefulness of the “cat and mouse” metaphor in *Maus*, considering the following:
 - A. How apt is the metaphor? Does it extend beyond the one-dimensional suggestion of a cat-and-mouse chase or of cats toying with their prey?
 - B. Cats hunt mice for a practical reason—their own survival. What did the Nazis believe was the practical reason for hunting Jews? Why did Nazis deem it necessary to their own survival?
 - C. Some have suggested that Spiegelman’s point is that humans are “nothing but animals.” Do you agree with this interpretation? Why or why not?
 - D. What characteristics or circumstances do Spiegelman’s Jews share with mice? What were the “mouse holes” of Nazi Germany?
3. As a librarian faced with the challenge of finding an appropriate location for *Maus*, would you shelve it with histories, comic books, biographies, fiction, or in some other pre-existing section? Defend your choice with specific examples from the book.
4. Using specific examples from the text, compare the artistic and narrative styles of the bulk of *Maus* with those of *Prisoner on the Hell Planet*, in *Maus I*. How does the form of each reflect its content?
5. An old saying has it that, while some *wait* for good luck, others make their own good luck. Using specific examples from the text, explain how this saying applies to Vladek.
6. Vladek tells his story in broken English peppered with Yiddish, Hebrew, and German words. What impact does the language in which his story is delivered have on the story itself? What, if anything, would be lost if Vladek’s language were rendered into standard—or proper—English?
7. In *Maus II*, Artie worries that “reality is too complex for comics...so much has to be left out or distorted.” What other approaches to recording “reality” or history in writing or pictures result in a lot being “left out” or “distorted”?
8. Explain the place and value of comedy in *Maus I* and *Maus II*. Is it appropriate in a work that deals with the Holocaust? Why do you think comedy and irony are included in the bulk of *Maus*, but are utterly absent from *Prisoner on the Hell Planet*?
9. Evaluate Spiegelman’s decision to include the story of Lucia in *Maus I*. Why does Spiegelman feel it necessary to make the story of Jews in the Holocaust “more REAL, more human”? (*Maus I*)

Chapter One: The Sheik

VOCABULARY

dowry – the money or possessions that a woman brings to her husband at marriage
textiles – fabric

1. What is the first thing we learn about Artie’s mother?

2. Why does Artie’s father object when Mala gives Artie a wire hanger on which to hang his coat?

3. What sort of drawings does Vladek think Artie should spend his time making?

4. We finally get our first shot of Artie’s father as a young man. What do you make of the shape Spiegelman uses for this panel?

Chapter Five: Mouse Holes

VOCABULARY

“Juden Raus!” – German for “Jews, out!”
liquidate – to put an end to; to abolish (also: to kill)
meshuga – Yiddish slang for “crazy; senseless”
neurotic – overanxious; panicky
nu – Yiddish for “so” or “obviously”
oi [oy] – Yiddish for “oh!” or “My God!”

1. Why is Artie reluctant to use tools or fix things around the house?

2. From what you have learned of Vladek and Artie so far, do you think Artie correctly or mistakenly read Vladek’s motives during their work around the house in Artie’s youth? Is Vladek a show-off? Would he enjoy proving Artie wrong?

3. Artie says to Francoise, “One reason I became an artist was that [Vladek] thought it was impractical—just a waste of time...it was an area where I wouldn’t have to compete with him.” What does this reveal about Artie’s feelings towards his father, and perhaps towards his father’s ordeal?

4. What costume does Art portray himself in in *Prisoner on the Hell Planet*?

Chapter Two: Auschwitz (Time Flies)

VOCABULARY

absolution – the act of having one’s sins cleansed away
appel – German for “an assembly”
cathartic – emotionally purging
hermetic – air-tight
munitions – weapons and ammunition
notary – one legally empowered to certify documents

1. Spiegelman writes, “Vladek started working as a tinman in Auschwitz in the spring of 1944...I started working on this page at the very end of February 1987.” He uses this same kind of balanced sentence structure to report the dates of other “then” and “now” events. What is the technical term for this kind of structure?

2. On the first page of this chapter, Spiegelman portrays himself—not “Artie”—for the first time. He draws himself as a human in a mouse mask. How does this differ markedly from the way he drew Vladek wearing a pig mask in *Maus I*? What is the significance of the difference?

3. Why are flies buzzing around Spiegelman as he sits at his drawing board? What do the corpses signify?

4. A man offers Spiegelman an advertising deal, casually referring to Spiegelman as “Artie” and saying, “We’ll make a million! Your dad would be proud!” What do both the man’s use of the familiar “Artie” and his assumption about Vladek indicate about the way Spiegelman feels about the reception of *Maus I*?
