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GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

Holocaust narrative through the literary devices
of the graphic novel in Art Spiegelman's *The
Complete Maus*

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Abstract:

This essay deals with the use of different literary devices such as the frame tale, points of view, personification of animals, and use of colors in Spiegelman's graphic novel *The Complete Maus* (1996), so as to create a Holocaust narrative. The use of these literary devices contributes to the portrayal of four characteristic issues within a Holocaust narrative: the memory of a Holocaust survivor, inevitably entailing the survivor's and second generation's identity, guilt and responsibility. Vladek is a Polish Jew that represents the generation of survivors and Artie, his son, interviews him about his experiences in Auschwitz. This process of exchanging the information needed for the book Artie is writing brings as a consequence the influence of the four issues mentioned before in Art and Vladek, as representatives of the second generation and the real survivor generation respectively.

Key words: memory, guilt, identity, responsibility, survivor, second generation, frame tale, point of view, personification, colors, Holocaust.

Resumen:

Este ensayo trata el uso de diferentes recursos literarios como la narración enmarcada, los puntos de vista, la personificación de animales, y el uso de colores, en la novela gráfica *The Complete Maus*, de Art Spiegelman; y su influencia en la creación de una narrativa del Holocausto. En este tipo de literatura es característico tratar el tema de la memoria del superviviente, que conlleva tratar los temas de la identidad, culpa y responsabilidad en la segunda generación de supervivientes, además de en los propios supervivientes. El uso de los recursos literarios mencionados contribuye a que sea posible analizar estos temas. Vladek es un judío polaco que representa la generación de los supervivientes y su hijo Artie le entrevista para obtener información sobre sus vivencias en Auschwitz. Durante el proceso de obtener la información necesaria para el libro que Artie está escribiendo, los temas de la memoria, identidad, culpa y responsabilidad influyen a Art y Vladek, como representantes de la segunda generación de supervivientes y la generación real de supervivientes respectivamente.

Palabras clave: memoria, culpa, identidad, responsabilidad, superviviente, segunda generación, narración enmarcada, punto de vista, personificación, colores, Holocausto.

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1. Introduction to the novel: the graphic novel and the Holocaust narrative.

The Complete Maus: A Survivor's Tale is a graphic novel formed by two volumes written by the American cartoonist and editor Art Spiegelman and published in 1996. *Maus* is defined by its form as a graphic novel, which, according to the *Cambridge Dictionary*, is a book containing a long story told mostly in pictures but with some writing ("Graphic novel"). Although this term may be confused with the term of "comic", according to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, they differ in the fact that comics are seen by many people as periodicals for children published on a weekly or monthly basis, sold at newsstands or in specialty comic bookstores, whereas graphic novels are long comic narratives directed to a mature audience, sold in bookstores, with serious literary themes and sophisticated artwork ("Graphic novel"). However, *Maus* is defined by its subject as a Holocaust narrative, this meaning that it deals with the extermination of the Jews carried out by the Nazi Germany between 1942 and 1945. To narrate this subject, Spiegelman is presented in the novel as a character itself that interviews his father Vladek about his experiences during the Holocaust while being a Polish Jew. Art is part of the second generation of a family that has directly suffered the Holocaust and because of it, he feels that he has the moral responsibility to preserve his father's memories as a survivor and that is what he does along the novel. This paper explores how different literary devices such as the tale frame, points of view, personification of animals and use of colors; have been used in Spiegelman's *Maus* in order to attain a Holocaust narrative that deals with survivor's and second generation's memory, guilt, identity, and responsibility.

2. Use of the frame story to portray memory, identity, guilt and responsibility.

The issues of memory, identity, guilt, and responsibility are all tackled through the use of the frame story in *Maus*. The frame narrative refers to the existence of different stories within the main story. Here, there are two frame narratives, with two different narrative voices. Artie is the narrator of the present and he interviews his father, who narrates the past as a framed story. The past is narrated through flashbacks, and this creates a notable contrast between present and past, making the narration more impacting. Through this literary technique of the frame narrative, memory is given a major importance throughout the whole novel, given that the creation of memory takes place simultaneously with the creation of the novel that Art will write. Memory can be described as the capacity to retain experiences lived and remembering them later; and we can divide this into individual memory and communicative memory. Vladek's individual memory shapes his identity and this is constantly expressed in the novel. He is unable to forget the struggles he lived through during the Holocaust, although he has tried to. Vladek's impossibility of coping with Holocaust memories makes him destroy whatever is in connection with it. For this reason, he burns Anja's written memories. Those memories are stuck in his head, and he admits it when he says: "All such things of the war, I tried to put out from my mind once



and for all...” (Spiegelman 258). Many of the conducts that shape his identity in the present are originated in the past, like his meanness. There is a panel in which he has to fix something on the rooftop and Artie recommends him to hire somebody, but he reproaches: “You and Mala! You both think money grows on bushes!” (Spiegelman 75). The existence of Vladek’s narrative frame in the past allows readers to understand that he gives a bigger value to money than other people because during the Second World War the Nazis forcibly took any money or valuable objects from Jewish people before entering



a concentration camp, leading most of them to economic ruin. Similarly, Vladek narrates that they suffered a severe starvation while in

Auschwitz and when Artie argues that when he was a child, his father used to serve him over again the food that he did not eat before until he ate it, Vladek exclaims: “Yes! So, it has to be, always you eat all what is on your plate” (Spiegelman 45). Therefore, these memories have shaped his behavior and identity, although it’s been years since he was freed. Nonetheless, not only individual memory is represented by a frame story.



Communicative memory is defined as the memory built in means of spatial closeness, regular interaction, points of view in common, and shared experiences. The conversations between Artie and Vladek are a



representation of this, but specifically, they represent the subtype called familial memory. This is based on the communication and interaction between different generations

within a family. This familial memory is overtly happening through the frame narrative. The whole novel is about Vladek narrating his story to his son and consequently, “Maus makes an implicit statement about Artie’s status as a witness to Vladek’s story of loss and suffering” (McGlothlin, 68). Therefore, Vladek makes Artie part of his memories. Ultimately, this affects Artie’s individual memory as well, shaping him and his relationship with his father. Nevertheless, Art struggles to embody the horror of the Holocaust in the way his father does because he has not lived through that event, which results in a feeling of guilt from Artie’s side in the present. He has had an easier life and at some point, admits that this torments him and that somehow, he wishes he had been in Auschwitz with his parents so he could really understand what they lived through (Spiegelman 176). With this, he also reveals that he feels guilty for portraying his parents’ story without being able to fully understand what they went through and considers the following: “I feel so inadequate trying to reconstruct a reality that was worse than my darkest dreams” (Spiegelman 176). Although this feeling of guilt is born in the survivor, Vladek, they arise in Art through the existence of the framed tale of the Holocaust and would not take place without it, given that it is exactly that what provides Artie with the

knowledge of what happened. Moreover, the guilt born out of portraying a story which does not belong to him leads to a debate about the second generation's responsibility. While survivors are silenced by the thought of not having done anything to avoid the Holocaust, the survivor's descendants are "haunted by history, they feel obligated to accept the burden of collective memory that has been passed to them and to assume the task of sustaining it" (Finn, 126), so they feel they have the responsibility of collecting these memories and inform the rest of the people about what happened, which is reflected in Artie. Perhaps, the reason why Art Spiegelman chooses to use the frame story is because, in this way, the narrator of the story he feels the responsibility to tell is actually narrated by the person who lived it. Anyhow, further in the narration, Art struggles about having already published Vladek's story and it having entailed his professional success. He feels overwhelmed about the situation because he is not sure if he has converted a moral responsibility into his own profit. Recapitulating, the fact that Spiegelman used the literary device of the frame story makes it possible to understand the ways in which the past narrative influences the present narrative. The portrayal of memory in a frame tale makes it possible to explain the behavior that forms Vladek's identity in the present and transforms Artie in a witness, shaping his identity in the present as well. Besides, Artie embodies the guilt of the responsibility of telling a story that he has not lived in the process of discovering his father's experiences, but he Spiegelman solves this through the frame story as well, transforming Vladek into the narrator of his own story.

3. Contraposition of points of view complicating familial memory.

Another literary device that unites the portrayal of the themes of memory, guilt, identity, and responsibility in the Holocaust narrative is the contraposition of Vladek and

Art's different points of view. It is common for a Holocaust narrative to present the points of view of two generations, given that in many cases survivors' guilt makes them remain silent and their descendants feel the responsibility to make public these atrocities. Because of the fact that this second generation has not lived through these experiences, it is common that they develop different points of view around the matter. In *Maus*, Art and Vladek show different points of view among some subjects that relate to memory, identity, guilt and responsibility. Regarding memory, Vladek overly admits that he does not want to remember anything about the Holocaust, as mentioned before, and Artie thinks that it is very important to not let it be forgotten. That is also why his father burns Anja's memories and Artie sees this a crime for memory. In the case of identity, the previous extracts that show Vladek's attachment to money and food cannot be understood by Artie before knowing what his father went through, so he just regards his father as annoying. Concerning guilt, Vladek feels guilty for having survived while others died, and Artie does not understand why he should feel guilty about that, taking into account that he could not have done anything to save them, it was beyond his reach. Consequently, Vladek thinks that it was his responsibility to do something to stop the massacre and Art does not understand his feeling of guilt and responsibility among this issue. This contrasts in their points of view have entailed their disrupted relationship, a situation that is not rare among survivors of the Holocaust and the second generation. There are various reasons for this to take place, but in the case of *Maus*, Art, as part of the second generation, had it difficult to understand his parents' past because his mother committed suicide and his father did not want to talk about the Holocaust. This is what Danieli has classified as a dumb family, where little or nothing was said about their Holocaust experiences, so children could not imagine what let them to such behavior (8). Eventually, this has considerably influenced Artie in the creation of the just mentioned differences in points

of view with his father. Nevertheless, there is a matter in which they share the same point of view: feeling guilty for Anja's suicide. Vladek feels guilty because he has not done



anything to avoid Anja's suicide and for being alive while she is not, and this survivor's guilt is transmitted from him to Artie. This is visible in a comic strip that Artie created about his mother's death, when he is crying, and a friend of the family says to him "Now you cry! Better you cried when your mother was still alive!" followed of another panel in which's caption Art states "I felt nauseous... the guilt was overwhelming!" (Spiegelman 104). Nevertheless, it is important to note that the fact that they share a point of view is not precisely positive, just like the rest of opposite points of view. All these points of view together entail the disturbance of the paternal-filial relationship and, ultimately, complicate the creation of familial memory, which is central in a Holocaust narrative.

4. Personification of animals and identities.

Non-literal language is portrayed through the literary device of personification, used advantageously through the format of graphic novel so as to create Holocaust narrative, and this meddles with the issue of identities. Spiegelman explains the reason

why he uses animals to portray different nationalities or ethnicities instead of real persons in an interview by Gary Groth, by saying:

I don't know what a German looked like who was in a specific small town doing a specific thing. My notions are born of a few score of photographs and a couple of movies. I'm bound to do something inauthentic [...] To use these ciphers, the cats and mice, is actually a way to allow you past the cipher at the people who are experiencing it. So it's a really much more direct way of dealing with the material (190-191).

The personification of animals also acts as a metaphor of identities in some cases. While the choice of using cats, mice or pigs is overtly significant, other personifications of minor groups seem to be randomly chosen. While Jews are drawn as mice, Germans are cats. This visually explains to the readers the idea of how Jews were seen by Germans as the victim, just like a cat wants to kill a mouse. Jews are deprived from their identity, forced into a condition of subalterns. Since they are presented as inferior, and they are persecuted by Germans during the Holocaust. The metaphor represented behind these two animals is an attempt to explain the defining racism of the Holocaust. The other nationality whose animal representation seems to be a metaphor are the Poles. They are depicted as pigs, animals that are quite dirty and indifferent. This could be related with the fact that Poles did not notoriously intercede to stop the extermination that was taking place, instead, some Jewish Poles betrayed themselves just to obtain an economic benefit from the Nazis. However, this is just one of many suppositions, because the real meaning is unknown. Lastly, Americans are represented as dogs for the wide-spread idea that dogs and cats do not get along well, hence, dogs would rather help mice than cats. Other groups such as Swedish, French, Brits, Gypsies are not paid that much attention in the novel, but some



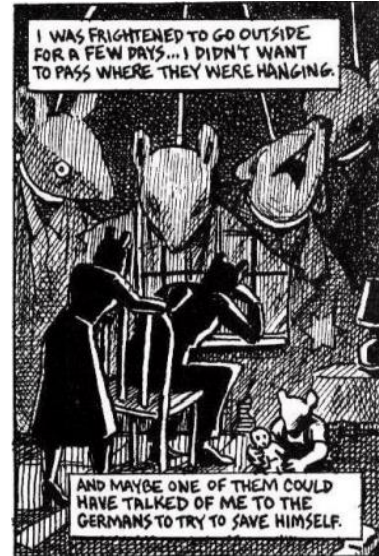
of them still represent their identities through the representation as different animals. At the very beginning of the second volume, Artie discusses with his wife which animals he should choose for each nationality or ethnicity. In the end, he chooses to draw frogs to

represent French people, and this could be a reference to the French tradition of eating frogs. In the case of Gypsies, the choice is more arbitrary, they are represented through moths, for the reason that there is a kind of moth called gypsy moth. The same takes place with the Brits and Swedish, fish represent Brits because of their island culture and reindeers represent Swedish people probably just because there are plenty of reindeers in Sweden. Summing up, the personification of animals in *Maus* acts as a metaphor of people's different identities and contributes to the creation of the Holocaust narrative.

5. Influence of colors in the portrayal of memory.

Furthermore, the use of colors is an important literary technique in a graphic novel and contributes significantly for the creation of this Holocaust narrative. It is shocking that in *Maus*, no colors other than black and white appear. This creates a negative connotation about the Holocaust from the very beginning. In fact, the scenes that represent

Vladek's most painful memories are presented slightly darker. For instance, Vladek narrates a scene in which four Jews are hanged during seven days for trading goods without coupons. The following frame depicts Vladek and Anja comforting each other in the dark, while the hanged mice are drawn above them in a bigger scale. Vladek utters: "I was frightened to go outside for a few days... I didn't want to pass where they were hanging"



(Spiegelman, 86), which is not specially impacting for the readers. However, it is the dark imagery used what makes us aware of how traumatizing this was for Vladek and his wife. Besides this scene, the book includes a comic strip that Artie made about his mother, called "Prisoner on the Hell Planet" (Spiegelman, 101). Here, Artie's most obscure thoughts about how guilty he feels for his mother's suicide are represented and the colors are markedly darker than in the rest of the book¹, including its margins in black. Therefore, the lack of vivid colors and the darkening of specific scenes contributes to the visual representation of guilt and responsibility in connection with memory.

6. Conclusion

Summing up, the choice in literary devices is important in *Maus* in order to create a Holocaust narrative that tackles the issues of memory, guilt, identity and responsibility in the survivors and the second generations. Memory is the main topic around which the rest of the issues are born, and this novel represents it through the narration of Vladek's memories, using the frame story. This literary device allows the readers to understand that Vladek's Holocaust experience has shaped his identity to the extent that he develops

an extreme attachment to money and overvalues food as treasure. In the act of Vladek narrating these stories to his son, there takes place an act of witnessing that influences Artie's identity, developing guilt and a sentiment of responsibility for something that he has never lived. Because of the presence of two narrative voices, each one belonging to a different generation, a conflict around their points of view is created. Vladek's feelings of guilt entailed that he chose to remain silent and forget about what happened rather than overtly talk about it with his son, which fragmented their relationship. Because of this, Artie could not understand how his father's identity was built, why he burnt Anja's memories or why he felt guilty for not being able to avoid the Holocaust and responsible of other people's death. Furthermore, the personification of mice as Jews and cats as Germans, among other personifications, contributes to the representation of identities within nationalities or ethnicities and the oppression that was carried out on different groups during the Holocaust, shaping their identities years after they were freed, and even second generations' identities. Lastly, the depriving of colors throughout the graphic novel plays an important role in the depiction of memory, since the parts in which traumatic events related with guilt are described are visually darker, contributing to a more impacting impression.

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