Jewish Oral Tradition: A Look At Human Rights Literature About The Holocaust

Hannah Lipman
English 300

I have listened long and hard to the stories about the Holocaust since I was a child. I can still hear the charismatic voice and see the hand motions of my bubbe telling me stories of my family’s past. Deep in my imagination, I have pictured what my relatives went through. In the realm of graphic novels, there is a genre called human rights. This genre has allowed authors like Art Spiegelman to write about the Holocaust through the form of art (comic style). While Jewish-American Women were the first among writers to begin to document the memories of the Holocaust, these regular novels, meaning non-comic, lack the pictorial effect of graphic novels (Brauner 24). Spiegelman’s Maus is not just a novel, but a form of the Jewish storytelling tradition. This tradition in Jewish culture is highly useful in retelling a family’s historical perspective on the Holocaust and the lives of loved ones now gone. I will use Maus, along with the graphic novel, Auschwitz (2004), to analyze graphic novels from a historical perspective. Louis Montrose and Stephen Greenblatt theorized a method called New Historicism, which I will be using as a lens for this paper (Parker 262). New Historicism “is not just about saying here is the historical background and then applying that historical background, as if it were a mere lump of inflexible facts, to the supposedly more nuanced challenge of interpreting literature.” Instead it “offers us a chance to put our chosen commitments to work by thinking through the relation between literature and the historical and cultural conflicts and changes that we care about deeply” (Parker 260-283). Two key phrases that will be used in this research paper are representations and cultural constructs. Both phrases hold a great deal of weight in the New Historicism method. By examining Human Rights Literature through the medium of graphic novels, I suspect to find a stronger use of “oral” storytelling that shows the Jewish perspective of the Holocaust, along with vicarious past lived by the younger generations reading the stories. I argue that graphic novels are the elite of Human Rights Literature, and allow for a more honest look at the Holocaust.

Approaching Maus from a New Historicism perspective, I find it key to start by looking at the different ways this graphic novel is part of the Human Rights genre in the form of historical storytelling. The story presented by Art Spiegelman is an on-going interview with his father (Vladek) about his survival of the Holocaust, and follows the oral form of storytelling in the Jewish tradition. As Michel E. Staub points out, Maus uses a traditional form of storytelling and documentary strategies relating to oral narratives (Staub 34). Spiegelman uses both direct quotes from his father, and direct thoughts of his own connections to his father’s past. At times objectivity and subjectivity are blurred, but this seems natural in ethnographic historical storytelling. Affirming this use of oral tradition, Staub remarks, “There is the present-day storytelling frame about Art and Vladek—[a] standard feature of ethnographic narrative[s], and its inclusion enhances rather than calls into question Maus’s” reminisced past (Staub 34). At times, it may seem that Vladek’s representations of the Holocaust are separate from the hegemonic history for this specific world war, but this is again common in oral storytelling, where the storyteller focuses on their personal experience and cultural perspective. In my own family, it is important to listen and take on the tradition of telling stories about our family’s historical past. Just as Spiegelman retells his father’s survival tale, I too retell the stories about my family and the Holocaust. This oral tradition is key in keeping the Holocaust memory alive. Why not just write it down? Spiegelman answers this question within Maus:

Art’s therapist Paul Pavel, a Czech Jew and a survivor of Terezin and Auschwitz, tells him during one of their weekly sessions: ‘I’m not talking about YOUR book now, but at how many books have already been written about the Holocaust. What’s the point? People haven’t changed…Maybe they need a newer, bigger Holocaust’. Frames like these about the uselessness of representations take on a very particular meaning in the context of Jewish history: they reflect a general anxiety over the impending death of all concentration camp survivors and their living memories. (Staub 35)

Holocaust survivors, like Vladek, have represented their memories in writings, videotapes, films, and recordings, but over time, the voices of these survivors will die. This is why oral storytelling is a key component to Human Rights literature. As Spiegelman is quoted in James E. Young’s article, The Holocaust and Vicarious Past, “the strength of commix lies in [its] synthetic ability to approximate a ‘mental language’ that is closer to actual human thought then either words or pictures alone” (Young 672). The use of both writing and graphics allows for a more natural feel of oral storytelling. As Young quotes Rudolphe Töpfler, “The drawings without their text would have only a vague meaning; the text without the drawings would have no meaning at all. The combinations make up a kind of novel—all the more unique in that it is no more like a novel than it is like anything else.” (Töpfler qtd. in Young 672). The Jewish tradition of oral storytelling is best used in graphic novels, where human rights issues and cultural constructs can be seen through pictorial and written form. This combination theory, backed by scholars such as James E. Young, Rudolphe Töpfler, and Winsor McKay (also a cartoonist), proves how through the medium of graphic novels, Jewish oral storytelling can be better exercised for historical Human Rights Literature. This is not to say
that written Human Rights Literature is not important or viable, but that graphic novels’ use of pictures enhances the oral aspect of retelling historical representations of the Holocaust.

Arguably, some might call Maus a misrepresentation of the Holocaust, and assert that written forms of Human Rights Literature are more accurate. There is no doubt in my mind that written works about the Holocaust are just as moving and emotional as graphic novels, but the use of pictures in the graphic novels helps readers connect on a deeper level with the subject matter. Even reporters have begun to use the form of graphic novels to give a more detailed effect of wars and human rights violations, where words are just not enough (Keane para. 6). Hillary Chute further confirms the narrative form of Maus, stating, “the specificities of reading graphically, of taking individual pages as crucial units of comics grammar—is essential to how [Maus] represents history. Indeed, Maus's contribution to thinking about the ‘crisis in representation’, I will argue, is precisely in how it proposes that the medium of comics can approach and express serious, even devastating, histories” (Chute 200). As I stated earlier, I have imagined the Holocaust from the stories told to me by my family, but never did I make as strong of a connection to a Holocaust survivor narrative as I did to Maus. I claim this is due to the use of traditional Jewish oral storytelling and corresponding pictures that feed the mind graphic detail. One example of this from Pascal Croci’s Auschwitz (see appendix A) shows how Jewish people in Auschwitz where forced to collect the dead bodies of those who had been gassed and throw them into a giant grave to be burnt. This historical event was highly traumatizing for those who lived through it. It is hard to describe a massacre of people with only words, but the use of pictures helps readers to better understand the human rights violations that took place during World War II. Pascal Croci, author of Auschwitz, uses minimal words when describing WWII in his graphic novel and places more focus on the pictures.

The event discussed above is also in Maus (see appendix B), but here Spiegelman is surrounded by burning corpses at his art table. He is hunched over—depressed by the weight of memories he has received from his father. This frame shows how human rights literature is able to convey the vicarious past in one slide. Visibly seeing what someone looks like under the effects of the vicarious past, allows for the reader to grasp what the vicarious past looks like, and maybe acknowledge their own life story. When I came to this very frame, I made a strong connection to how Spiegelman must have felt while writing Maus. As Young explains, Spiegelman is part of the “media-savvy generation” that was born right after the Holocaust, but still shaped by its events (Young 669).

This postwar generation after all, cannot remember the Holocaust as it actually occurred. All they remember, all they know of the Holocaust, is what the victims have passed down to them in their memoirs. They remember not actual events but the countless histories, novels, and poems of the Holocaust they have read, the photographs, movies, and video testimonies they have seen over the years. They remember long days and nights in the company of survivors, listening to their harrowing tales, until their lives, loves, and losses seemed grafted indelibly onto their own life story. (Young 669)

Graphic novels have the ability to show this type of deep listening and deep memories being passed down by generations. Maus shows the reader Spiegelman writing down Vladek’s tormented past, and through photos we can see how these traumas are transmuted into Spiegelman’s life story. I argue that the vicarious past is an aspect of Jewish storytelling. I do not see vicarious past as purely a bad thing. By taking on the memories of our beloved family, we can account for their life story and history to be passed down to the next generation and so on.

Non-pictorial literature in the Human Rights genre has the ability to represent WWII in the form of Jewish storytelling, but what happens when the “indescribable” cannot be translated into words? Katalin Orbán explains the struggle Spiegelman writes about in his autobiography No Towers—how hard it was to picture what he would draw to show the smells of Auschwitz and the parts of the Holocaust which his father called indescribable (Orbán 58). In the end, Spiegelman did find a way to culturally construct what his father called indescribable. Tsai Mei-Yu, author of A Poetics of Testimony and Trauma Healing in Anne Michaels’s Fugitive Pieces, states that while literature was the capability to represent the Holocaust, it is unable to describe what is indescribable (Tsai 50-71). In the novel Inheriting the Holocaust, Paula S. Fass explains “I am the daughter of Holocaust survivors. This fact has been inscribed in my identity since I was a child—In this book, I have decided to speak and to share my memories because I now firmly believe that my memories do count” (Fass 1). Fass definitely represents the vicarious past and is able to describe some of the Holocaust memories passed down to her, but what her book lacks is the ability to create a picture in the reader’s mind. In Auschwitz, the author gives the reader direct snap-shots of what one might see as their family’s past (see appendix C).

Another element that makes graphic novels the most effective form of Human Rights Literature is its direct postwar protest towards Bilderverbot (the name given to the ban on images in Germany during WWII) (Orbán 59). Spiegelman’s Maus is a direct literary campaign against the Nazi ban on images during WWII. Graphic novels not only verbally object to human rights violations, but they visually show how these social injustices are/were affecting people. As Orbán points out, “From the ghettos
through sealed boxcars to the camps and the sites and modes of killing, the conditions of the ‘concentrationary universe’ restricted the visual records that could be made” (Orbán 59). These restricted views are made visible through graphic novels like *Maus*.

As Fass recites, “When I was a child, I thought as a child (almost) and wanted some space to grow between the edges of the stories my parents told of a life once lived in a past now gone. As a grownup, I want to pass some of this along to my children who will have to find their own space to grow in” (Fass 182). Growing up as Jewish child, the Holocaust was always a part of my life—it was something I was not allowed to forget—it was my bedtime story. While I may not want to have children, I feel it is a part of my Jewish heritage to pass along the stories I have been told to the younger generations. Graphic novels within the Human Rights genre have allowed authors like Art Spiegelman to write about the Holocaust through the form of art (comic style). Spiegelman’s *Maus* is not just a novel, but a practice of Jewish storytelling. *Maus* gives representations of Jewish people and takes into account cultural constructs imposed upon specific groups during the Holocaust. Human Rights Literature through the medium of graphic novels allows for a more visually-truthful look at the Holocaust. Graphic novels expose the “destruction of historical memories” of survivors of the Holocaust and children of Holocaust survivors—through this unearthing, Jewish storytelling is used to remember the life of these survivors and the powerful memories that should not be forgotten.

**Notes**

1 Vicarious Past: trauma and history displaced onto a younger generation from an older generation

**Works Cited**


Appendix A

Fig. 1. Croci, Pascal. Auschwitz. 2004.

Appendix B

Fig. 2. Spiegelman, Art. Maus. 1994.

Appendix C

Fig. 3. Croci, Pascal. Auschwitz. 2004.