Vladek Spiegelman and the Holocaust: Analyzing Parallel Aspects of Behavior

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ENG 300-001

The graphic novel *Maus* narrated Vladek Spiegelman’s survival of the Holocaust. While most of the story took place in the past through Vladek’s memories, everything else is told through the perspective of his son, Art Spiegelman, who is also the author of *Maus*. Spiegelman took the reader back and forth in time to contrast Vladek’s change in personality, as well as his growth. Not only did this highlight Vladek’s character, but it also demonstrated the underlying changes in his behavior due to his experiences during the Holocaust. As the novel progressed, the reader is exposed to Vladek’s behavior due to his experiences during the Holocaust. As the severity of the injustice grew, countless Jews were killed off one after another. It reached a point where German guards had to recount the total number continuously (Spiegelman 50). Here, Vladek was constantly being reminded that his chances of survival were slim. It was clear that at any moment, he could have been executed without second thought; death surrounded him. Jews were almost always being counted off, dead or alive, and Vladek was amidst this.

For Vladek to prevent these events and the attached emotions from resurfacing, he used a defense mechanism- his pills. “Adaptation is made possible by defenses. These are psychological configurations operating outside the realm of consciousness which minimize conflict, reduce tension, maintain, intrapsychic equilibrium, regulate self-esteem and play a central role in dealing with anxiety…” (Bateman & Holmes 76). His identification tattoo reminded him that his identity did not have value, the abuse from German guard’s endangered his life and the systematic numbering of Jews indicated his limited chance of survival. These three events were key reminders of the cruel treatment he received. His strong attachment with medication blocked any interference and separated his memories in Auschwitz with his current life. Meticulous pill organization repressed these specific events and combated any attached emotions from resurfacing.

As depicted throughout the novel, Artie and Vladek went through the normal routine of everyday life. They were seen taking walks, eating meals, and even go grocery shopping together. On one trip to the grocery store, Artie and Francoise, his wife, decided to accompany Vladek, who wanted to return his opened...
boxes of food because he did not want to waste them. Artie refused to walk into the store with Vladek, so he waited in the car. Vladek returned with “six dollars worth of new groceries for only one dollar” and Artie was incredibly shocked (Spiegelman 250). He produced a situation where the manager could understand him, “He helped me as soon as I explained to him my health, how Mala left me, and how it was in the camps” (Spiegelman 250). Vladek used his personal information to gain sympathy and achieve his goal, thus the grocery store manager understood him and accepted his request.

The previous act is not normal and stemmed from an underlying parallel in correlation to Vladek’s holocaust survival story. The scene at the grocery store demonstrated one of Vladek's survival tactics -- he created a network of connections in the concentration camps. He taught English to a German guard that lead to a spiral of events that kept him safe. Additionally, in order to help a friend who endured harsher treatment he negotiated with the guard, “I-I don’t want to make trouble. You’ve been so kind to me…” (Spiegelman 33). In result, the guard positively responded and agreed to his request because Vladek emphasized his gratitude and appreciation. The relationship Vladek created with the German guard increased his chances of survival because he continuously compromised with them. When Vladek helped the German guard, they did the same in return. The guard protected him because of the status he attained which eventually led to improved treatment.

Vladek would not have been able exchange his used groceries if he did not use his personal information such as his health and marriage problems, along with his experiences in the concentration camp. His tactics used here are manifestations of that same negotiation skill he used in Auschwitz. The German guard would have denied Vladek’s request to help a friend if he did not emphasize his appreciation and the kindness he received from them. In both situations, he ultimately got what he wanted due to his negotiation skills. This eventually resurfaced into his current behavior. It “…reveals how new ideas often emerge from, but do not entirely replace, previous ones…” (Bateman & Holmes 4). Vladek developed this skill and used it when it was necessary, which was in a time of war. When he escaped, he no longer used it for its original purpose. It was recycled, but still contained elements from its original form. This explained how he was swift and efficient in the store because in a sense this skill was never lost, simply forgotten.

Lastly, although the scene is very brief, Vladek openly voiced his racial views on African Americans. He harshly criticized Francoise for picking up a male African American hitchhiker, and claimed that he was going to steal his groceries. Artie then points out a clear fact; Vladek’s racism was similar to how the Nazis treated Jews (Spiegelman 259). Vladek did not even acknowledge his prejudice, even as Artie pointed out the irony. Vladek then clarified that African Americans cannot be compared to the Jews. (Spiegelman 259). To understand how Vladek’s thinking came to be, his behavior can be analyzed from a psychoanalytic perspective, while applying elements of race theory and Marxism.

Firstly, critical race theory (CRT) is defined as “studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power” (Delgado et al., 2). The ‘social construction' thesis, an element of CRT, “holds that race and races are products of social thought and relations. Not objective, inherent, or fixed, they correspond to no biological or genetic reality; rather, races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient” (Delgado et al., 7). In volume one of Maus, the reader is exposed to a gradual shift in hierarchy where Nazis rose to prestige. As their power grew dominant, their racial biases were voiced loudly and influenced the relationship between Jews and Nazis.

Racial formation theory (RFT), developed by Michael Omi and Howard Winant, claimed that “though we make our racial identities, we do not do so under circumstances of our own choosing” (qtd. in Thomas 75). In chapter one of Maus, Vladek did not mention any discriminating attitude changes towards Jews. He is seen walking through the streets with Lucia, and together, they enjoy a night of dancing. (Spiegelman 13-14). This clearly illustrated Jews as civilized individuals that could peacefully associate with other members of society. However, because of the shift in power, social and political forces targeted Jews as an 'inferior race'.

In Understanding Movements in Modern Thought, Marxism stood to “defy that prohibition on radical thinking about social alternatives” (Boucher 2), meaning Marxists challenged the reproduction of dominant features in society. This theory approached a materialist perspective founded by Karl Marx who theorized “…the evolving history of humankind, of its social groupings and interrelations, of its institution, and of its ways of thinking are largely determined by the changing mode of its ‘material production’…” (Abrams & Harpham 204). With the Nazis branded as a prominent status of being the ideal race, society became exposed to their racial opinions about Jews that were founded on material appearances. In turn, these misconceptions became mass produced and distributed to the population. Vladek endured the Nazis racial abuse the entire time he was in Auschwitz. These misjudgments influenced social thought because of their rise to power. They were widely dispersed amongst the Jewish race and the rest of the population. This lead most citizens to label these fabricated lies as the ultimate truth, and construct a completely new identity for them. It resulted into an ongoing system of oppression.

With CRT, RFT, and Marxism in mind, Vladek’s racial opinions can be understood using psychoanalysis as an overall foundation. Through a Freudian lens,
with his notion of the unconscious, “he postulated that unacceptable memories, phantasies, wishes, thoughts, and ideas and aspects of painful events were pushed back by repression into the unconscious along with their associated emotions” (Bateman & Holmes 29). In the years following the Holocaust, Vladek transferred these memories associated with extreme racial prejudice past his consciousness. It became repressed, but not forgotten. Aspects of racial thought still lingered through his psyche because of the extreme segregation he endured and could not escape from. His ideologies mimic the perception Germans had on Jews; he assumed African Americans were of a lesser race based only on physical appearances.

Dominick LaCapra wrote “transference is inevitable to the extent that an issue is not dead, provokes an emotion and evaluated response, and entails the meeting of history with memory” (qtd. in Budick). Vladek used appearances as a basis of determining if the hitchhiker could be treated the same way as himself, Artie, two Jewish men, and Francoise, a French woman. He constructed an identity for the hitchhiker from his opinions, and strongly voiced them. Considering he was the subject of racism, one would think Vladek’s attitudes toward prejudice would not mimic those who forced him to endure cruel treatment. The painful memories of being discriminated against were not gone, but rather they were stored in his unconsciousness.

The scene with the hitch hiker evoked that exact memory, and thus he becomes the one who was discriminating against others. Emotions associated with oppression transferred onto his present state, and emerged into his ideologies. His actions toward the African American hitchhiker illustrated a similarity to the way the Nazis treated the Jews. The social construction thesis acknowledges that public interactions constituted racial identities. Vladek’s opinion may not have been innate, as it was influenced by the long-standing material ideologies that circulated throughout the Holocaust. His racism showed how influential social forces are. It was powerful enough to alter one’s original perspective and form an entirely new one. When he encountered a situation similar to these memories, it triggered a response that was identical to the behavior Nazis exhibited.

Psychoanalysis, along with Marxism, critical race theory, and racial formation theory, provided an in-depth analysis of Vladek Spiegelman’s psychological transformation from the Holocaust. His behavior illustrated in the present resulted from his past experiences, however they are not expressed in ways obviously related to post-traumatic stress. His daily habits, such as meticulous pill organization, stemmed from the systematic numbering and mistreatment of Jewish prisoners that Vladek endured. The scene where he used negotiation skills in a grocery store were manifestations of the same tactics that allowed him higher protection from German guards. Vladek’s racism may have also resulted from Nazi social forces that distributed misjudgments based on material appearances. The scene where he met an African American hitchhiker evoked a response similar to his memories of extreme segregation. History did not mean events in the past have no relation to present times. Spiegelman’s choice in shifting the story between Vladek’s past and Artie’s present narrations entailed that the Holocaust is still relevant; the parallel aspects of behavior demonstrated its significant and impact. Although the Holocaust ended, Vladek Spiegelman was still indirectly dealing with the trauma. Depicted throughout Maus, Vladek’s behavior provided evidence of connections that could be ultimately translated back to his Holocaust experiences.

**Works Cited**


