

Exploring Dehumanization In The Maus Comics By Art Spiegelman

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Abstract. *This study limits the problem its problem to the issue of social dehumanization depicted in the comic Maus, which as a reflection of the Jewish community's condition in Germany during the Nazi regime. This research is qualitative research that uses Ian Watt's sociology of literature as a basis for theorizing. By regarding literature as a reflection of society, this research aims to elucidate how the comic Maus reflects the issue of dehumanization, based on the social realities of the World War II era. The data used in this study are quotations from the comic Maus, supplemented by supporting literature such as books and scholarly articles. The data collection techniques employed in this research include: 1) identifying social issues within the comic, 2) analyzing and interpreting these social issues, 3) examining the data as a reflection of society depicting the social problem of dehumanization among the Jewish community in Germany during the Nazi regime, and 4) formulating conclusions based on the analysis conducted. The conclusion drawn from this research is that the comic Maus serves as a reflection of the dehumanization in Germany according to the author's perspective or ideology, influenced by the author's social background. As a reflection of social realities, Maus cannot fully represent the entirety of society. Through the author, who represents a segment of society that experienced the Holocaust, Spiegelman presents his social viewpoint on the dehumanization that occurred in Germany, drawing from his family's experiences as survivors of the horrific events perpetrated by the Nazis.*

Keywords: *Comic, Dehumanization, Holocaust, Sociology of literature*

Abstrak. Penelitian ini membahas permasalahan pada isu dehumanisasi sosial yang digambarkan dalam komik Maus, yang merupakan refleksi dari kondisi komunitas Yahudi di Jerman selama rezim Nazi. Penelitian ini adalah penelitian kualitatif yang menggunakan sosiologi sastra Ian Watt sebagai dasar teoretis. Dengan menganggap sastra sebagai refleksi dari masyarakat, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menjelaskan bagaimana komik Maus mencerminkan isu dehumanisasi, berdasarkan realitas sosial era Perang Dunia II. Data yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini adalah kutipan dari komik Maus, yang dilengkapi dengan literatur pendukung seperti buku dan artikel ilmiah. Teknik pengumpulan data yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini meliputi: 1) mengidentifikasi isu sosial dalam komik, 2) menganalisis dan menginterpretasikan isu-isu sosial tersebut, 3) memeriksa data sebagai refleksi dari masyarakat yang menggambarkan masalah sosial dehumanisasi di antara komunitas Yahudi di Jerman selama rezim Nazi, dan 4) merumuskan kesimpulan berdasarkan analisis yang dilakukan. Kesimpulan dari penelitian ini adalah bahwa komik Maus berfungsi sebagai refleksi dehumanisasi di Jerman menurut perspektif atau ideologi penulis, yang dipengaruhi oleh latar belakang sosial penulis. Sebagai refleksi dari realitas sosial, Maus tidak dapat sepenuhnya mewakili keseluruhan masyarakat. Melalui penulis, yang mewakili segmen masyarakat yang mengalami Holocaust, Spiegelman menyajikan pandangan sosialnya tentang dehumanisasi yang terjadi di Jerman, berdasarkan pengalaman keluarganya sebagai penyintas peristiwa mengerikan yang dilakukan oleh Nazi.

Kata kunci: Dehumanisasi, Holocaust, Komik, Sosiologi Sastra

1. INTRODUCTION

The modern world is a stage of social conflict that popular fiction must confront to succeed. Readers play an active role in shaping themselves through reading. In this context, texts are considered in terms of form, structure, genre, and within the era of information. The relationship between the world, the reader, and the text is seen as a reciprocal process that requires reader interaction. Readers are not just products of the world but agents within it who change it through their actions. Although reading is often considered a passive and recreational activity, engaging with popular fiction is part of a larger process of change. Popular fiction can provide the narratives needed to reposition oneself in relation to the world. Thus, readers of popular fiction are actively involved in the process of self-reformation, which has utopian potential (Mc Cracken, 1998: 16).

Popular fiction refers to literary works that are widely consumed by the masses, often with broad appeal across society. One form of popular fiction that is widely popular across various cultures worldwide is comics.

In the modern era, filled with various forms of art and literature, comics have emerged as a spotlight in understanding and expressing human life. Comics are a literary work created by authors for readers with the aim of conveying a portrayal of moral life in society through the arrangement of images (McCloud, 2000:10). As time progresses, comics are increasingly favored by society due to their excellent visualizations and easier comprehension. Therefore, comics are not only entertaining but also educational, much like the nature of literary works themselves.

Comics are widely known by the public as illustrated stories. According to Scott McCloud in his book "Reinventing Comics: How Imagination and Technology Are Revolutionizing an Art Form" (2000:10), the definition of comics is a literary work that portrays moral life in society through the arrangement of images, which can be studied and reflect the author's worldview, era, and world. Like other literary works, both the images and text in comics are created, inspired, and formed by the author's imagination, life experiences, habits, religion, and culture, which are channeled and conveyed through pictures and words.

The social, cultural, and political influences that shape a work cannot be ignored, as literature is considered one of the cultural and social phenomena and also as a product of society. The author, as the creator of the literary work, is a member of society. In creating literary works, authors cannot detach themselves from the society in which they live, so the

things depicted in literary works often represent the realities occurring within society. Similarly, readers who enjoy literary works are also members of society, with various social, cultural, political, and psychological backgrounds that influence their choice of reading materials and interpretation of the works they read. (Nurholis, 2019:13).

As a reflection of society, comics also strive to keenly portray societal conditions, although they are still influenced by the ideology and social background of the author. According to Ian Watt (in Damono, 1978: 3), literature as a mirror of society is judged by the extent to which a literary work can reflect the state of society. “Maus” by Art Spiegelman is a work that addresses the theme of dehumanization against the backdrop of Nazi Germany during World War II. This work has had a significant impact on the development of literature, as Spiegelman was able to depict the cruelty and suffering of the Holocaust through the metaphor of animals. Additionally, the work portrays the ongoing impact of Holocaust trauma on subsequent generations, highlighting the personal and familial struggles to overcome haunting memories that shape one's identity and experiences in life.

As the author of the comic “Maus”, which depicts the Holocaust through a survival story told in interviews between Art Spiegelman and his father, Vladek, this work is autobiographical and uses a representational technique that expands by portraying Jews as mice, Germans as cats, Americans as dogs, Poles as pigs, French as frogs, and so on. Spiegelman was born in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1948. He immigrated to the United States with his parents in 1951, settling in Queens, New York. Inspired by the distinctive humor of Mad Magazine, he pursued a career as a cartoonist, later attending Manhattan's High School of Art and Design. His professional journey included contributing artwork for Topps Chewing Gum, where he played a significant role in the development of iconic trading card series such as Garbage Pail Kids and Wacky Packages. Although he did not complete his degree at the State University of New York at Binghamton, he became a prominent figure in American literature and illustration by elevating comic storytelling into a sophisticated literary medium for adult audiences. One of his works, “Maus,” encapsulates personal experiences and his family's story during World War II, including Art Spiegelman's experiences as a Jewish child in Poland and his father's, Vladek Spiegelman's, survival of the Holocaust. Using simple yet effective visual techniques, “Maus” successfully addresses heavy and complex themes, turning them into a compelling and memorable narrative, making it one of the most famous and influential comics in comic history. This work also serves as an excellent example of using visual media to communicate heavy and complex stories and depicting the immigrant experience in the United States.

Based on these reasons, Art Spiegelman's comic "Maus" will be analyzed using Ian Watt's sociology of literature approach, which positions literary works as reflections of society and influenced by the author's ideology as part of a particular social group. "Maus" is chosen for analysis because its content reflects the social conditions of suffering endured by the Jewish community during the Holocaust, as mirrored by the author's social ideology and influencing social conditions. This study will examine how the author portrays representations of dehumanization carried out by Nazi Germany, as encountered in the comic "Maus".

This research focuses on the social issue of dehumanization depicted in the comic "Maus", which serves as a reflection of the social suffering endured by the Jewish community at the hands of Nazi Germany. The aim of this study is to delineate the forms of dehumanization present during World War II as depicted and elucidated in the comic "Maus", which will then be analyzed using a sociology of literature perspective. As a reflection of society, the comic presents Art Spiegelman's viewpoint, representing the Jewish community, which perceives the Nazi regime as a group of vile individuals perpetrating acts of dehumanization, such as tattooing numbers for distinguishing Jews from other races, and even being deemed non-human by Adolf Hitler.

This research aims to explore social issues as reflected in the comic "Maus" written by Art Spiegelman, based on Ian Watt's perspective that literature mirrors society, meaning to what extent literature can be considered a reflection of societal conditions. Literary works can reflect the societal conditions at the time they were written, thus serving as documents that record the societal conditions of their era. By also involving social factors beyond the personal realm, authors use literature as a medium to represent a group within society in conveying their thoughts.

2. THEOROTICAL REVIEW

This section outlines relevant theories that underpin the research on social dehumanization depicted in Art Spiegelman's comic "Maus." The study adopts a qualitative approach grounded in Ian Watt's sociology of literature. This theoretical framework views literature as a mirror of society, where literary works not only reflect individual narratives but also represent broader social realities (Watt, in Damono, 1978).

This section also outlines how past trauma affects subsequent generations through narrative and visual media. Hirsch (1997) introduces the concept of *postmemory*, which

describes the relationship that later generations have to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before, with experiences they “remember” only through the stories, images, and behaviors they encountered in their childhood (Hirsch, 1997, p. 22).

Additionally, LaCapra (2001) highlights that after trauma, any memory of the event tends to be highly disturbing and even traumatic. This is particularly evident in the post-Holocaust world, where the stakes of remembering or forgetting could not be higher (LaCapra, 2001, p. 41). Young (1988) also observes that Holocaust narratives create critical tension between history and memory, between what is remembered and what can be written down, raising profound questions about the representation of events that seem to defy narrative structure (Young, 1988, p. 22).

Furthermore, Eaglestone (2004) argues that the postmodern condition reshapes our understanding of the Holocaust, not by diminishing the reality or horror of the event, but by challenging us to consider how we know and represent such events. This challenge is central to any study of Holocaust representation in contemporary culture (Eaglestone, 2004, p. 11).

Art Spiegelman, through his work “Maus,” presents a narrative of the dehumanization experienced by the Jewish community during the Nazi regime. The use of visual metaphors, such as depicting Jews as mice and Germans as cats, illustrates how the comic reflects historical trauma and cultural memory of the Holocaust (Salim, 2023). In this context, “Maus” serves not only as a personal narrative but also as a powerful representation of how literature can capture the essence of dehumanization within a broader historical context.

Previous research has shown that literary works can serve as documents that record social conditions and history at a particular time (Nurholis, 2019). By employing a sociology of literature approach, this study will identify social issues within “Maus,” analyze how the comic reflects issues of dehumanization, and formulate conclusions based on the analysis conducted.

Thus, the theoretical framework in this research provides a robust foundation for understanding how literary works like “Maus” can be used as reflections of social conditions during the depicted era, and how the author's personal experiences and social background influence the narrative and understanding of dehumanization within the work.

3. METHOD

This research is qualitative, with focus on the quality of data. Qualitative methods prioritize natural data, considering data within its context. In literary research, for example, the author, the author's social environment, and general cultural elements are involved (Ratna, 2004: 47). The objects of this research can be divided into two categories: material and formal. The material object in this study is the comic "Maus" by Art Spiegelman. The formal object is the comic's structure that constructs the story and the dehumanization reflecting the suffering of the Jewish community depicted in the comic "Maus" by Art Spiegelman.

Primary data for this research consists of narrative texts containing dialogue between characters, phrases, and sentences found in the comic "Maus". Art Spiegelman's work will be examined using Ian Watt's sociology of literature approach. In addition to primary data, secondary data for this research includes Art Spiegelman's social background. Data sources reflecting the Jewish community are obtained from the comic "Maus". Apart from the comic, supporting data sources for this research include several articles about Art Spiegelman's social background and his social position in society. Research on Art Spiegelman and his works also serves as sources of information that can support this research.

Data analysis techniques involve analyzing data using Ian Watt's sociology of literature approach, which is related to the reflection of society in literature. The steps taken by the author are 1) identifying social issues present in the comic, 2) analyzing data that reflect societal issues in the lives of the Jewish community during the Holocaust, and 3) formulating conclusions based on the analysis conducted.

4. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Author's Social Background

Art Spiegelman, an American cartoonist, was born on February 15, 1948, in Stockholm, Sweden, to Jewish parents who had fled Nazi Germany. His father, Vladek Spiegelman, was a survivor of Auschwitz and the Holocaust, and his mother, Wanda Spiegelman, was a Polish-born refugee who had lost her family in the war. This tumultuous background significantly influenced Art's life and work, particularly in his comic "Maus," which explores the experiences of his father during World War II.

Spiegelman's early life was marked by his family's struggles to rebuild their lives in the United States. His father, Vladek, worked multiple jobs to support the family, while Art's mother, Wanda, struggled with depression and eventually left the family. This tumultuous environment shaped Art's perspective on the world and his desire to understand his father's experiences during the war.

Spiegelman's interest in cartooning began at an early age, and he started drawing comics as a teenager. He attended the High School of Art and Design in New York City and later studied at the Pratt Institute, where he honed his skills as a cartoonist. After college, he worked as an assistant to cartoonist Will Elder and later became the editor of the underground comic book magazine "Raw" with his wife, Françoise Mouly.

Spiegelman's most notable work is "Maus," a comic that tells the story of his father's experiences during World War II, including his time in Auschwitz. The book won widespread critical acclaim and earned Spiegelman the Pulitzer Prize in 1992. "Maus" is widely regarded as a masterpiece of the comic genre, and its impact on the medium is still felt today.

Throughout his career, Spiegelman has been recognized for his innovative storytelling and his ability to tackle complex and sensitive subjects through his work. He has received numerous awards and accolades, including the National Book Critics Circle Award and the Reuben Award for Outstanding Cartoonist of the Year.

Social Dehumanization Issues

A literary work encompasses factual occurrences within society, depicting various social phenomena. The author, as a part of society, brings a cultural understanding that influences the portrayals of life represented in their work. Thus, literature can be seen as documentation of social conditions reflected in comics, framing societal issues in an engaging and thought-provoking manner (Salim, 2023). According to Nurholis (2019: 153), literature reflects society and the problems within it. As a reflection of society, literature not only receives influence from its social environment but also has the ability to influence society itself. The sociological approach to literature, oriented towards mimesis, emphasizes the importance of viewing literature as a reflection of societal structure. The main goal of this approach is to accurately depict the relationship between elements within literature and social aspects such as authors, readers, and existing social phenomena.

Quoting from Nurholis (2019: 155), Watt emphasizes the importance of the interconnection between race, moment, and environment in literature, which are key social

factors in literature. However, a debate arises when literature meticulously depicts these three factors: some consider it low-quality because it seems too obvious, while others deem it high-quality because it can embed a profound understanding of life. In evaluating literature as a social reflection, it is important to note that literature can serve as a mirror of social activities, with reflection and mirror contributing to bringing social reality into literature. However, there are times when literature only scratches the surface of societal life, while the depth of literature will explore things hidden beneath that surface.

Based on the quoted theory, Art Spiegelman's *Maus* adheres to the principles of mimesis as long as it utilizes art as a crucial expression of trauma. The truth becomes refined in the context of the idea that mimesis involves portraying race, moment, and environment with metaphorical elements - in this case, Spiegelman effectively embeds a profound understanding of life, such as the truth of trauma, without worrying about it being identical to the psychological debris of the author or narrator. Spiegelman's mimesis of the Holocaust employs visual metaphors, using cats to represent Germans, mice for Jews, pigs for Poles, dogs for Americans, etc. The truth of the Holocaust is articulated most objectively. Both narrators in the comic - Vladek and Artie (Spiegelman himself) - while confronting personal demons, artistically mimic the reality of the Holocaust by freeing themselves from the burden of subjective representation.

**"The Jews are undoubtedly a race,
but they are not human."
Adolf Hitler**

Picture 1. Spiegelman, A (2003). *Maus I*: p. 3

As an epilogue to Chapter One, Spiegelman includes a quote from Adolf Hitler: "The Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not human." And deliberately, Spiegelman introduces animals, which are 'not human', to tell this story: Jews are not depicted as humans, but as mice, vermin that must be eradicated for perfection to thrive, for nobler races to prevail. He also portrays Nazis as cats, Poles as pigs, and America as dogs. The metaphor of *Maus* in Spiegelman's work creates a powerful representation of the Holocaust trauma experience, encompassing vulnerability, enduring suffering, and escape. Spiegelman successfully captures the essence of that experience even as he draws from the reality of the Holocaust.



Picture 2. Spiegelman, A (2003). Maus I: p. 54

As these picture show, the Holocaust survivor Vladek, turned into a mouse, says: "I'm not going to die, and I won't die here! I want to be treated like a human being". The character of Vladimir is drawn as an animal to give specific form to stereotypes and yet affirms its humanity and demands to be treated 'like a human being'.



Picture 3. Spiegelman, A (2003). Maus I: p. 33

This picture shows how the Nazis compel Jews to sell their businesses to Germans. It features a prominent swastika in the background, the recognizable Star of David in the middle ground, and two soldiers, one of whom wears an armband, presumably a Nazi insignia. While these visual elements may not convey specific meaning individually, they have become symbolic representations of the conflict between the Nazis and the Jews. The soldiers appear to be denying something to an intimidated character, possibly a woman holding a purse. The swastika, remaining speechless, serves as a constant underlying presence throughout the scene. Through this single panel, Spiegelman effectively depicts a certain action while mimicking the silent, pervasive authority of the swastika and the silenced victim. Readers engage not in appreciating the aesthetic qualities of the artwork, but in deciphering the subtext and interpreting the visual symbols. Picture 3. Spiegelman, A (Maus I, 2003: p. 33)

**Picture 4. Spiegelman, A (2003). Maus II: pp. 6 and 34**

In these pictures show the historical truth. The first photograph is the one of Art and his mother, the second one portrays his brother Richieu, and the third one is of Vladek, inserted only at the very end of the comic. The photographs are used to represent the historical truth, the proof of Vladek's tale. Maus is a work of fiction, but one of historical fiction, where the drawings and more broadly the comic strip form purposely connect the past to the present. The photographs work towards a glimpse of the history that took place. They represent both historical documents insofar as in them lies the proof of this family's existence, but they also represent post-memory as Spiegelman has inherited memories that have had a great impact on his life.



Figure 5. Spiegelman, A (2003). *Maus II*: p. 41

In these images, Spiegelman disrupts the temporal flow of the narrative by envisioning a potential future: he imagines his book achieving commercial success, thereby commodifying his father's narrative. Instead of portraying himself as a mere mouse, he wears a mouse mask and, speaking from atop a mound of Jewish corpses, acknowledges feeling quite despondent. This portrayal hints at the complexities of authorship and the emotional weight of retelling his father's story in a commodified form.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the exploration of Art Spiegelman's social background unveils the profound influence of his upbringing on his iconic work, particularly "Maus," which delves into his father's experiences during the Holocaust. Born to Jewish parents who fled Nazi Germany, Spiegelman's tumultuous familial history shapes his perspective and artistic expression. Through his masterful storytelling, Spiegelman skillfully captures the essence of trauma and dehumanization during the Holocaust, employing visual metaphors to convey the harrowing reality of this dark chapter in history. His use of animals as characters symbolizes

the dehumanization of Jews by Nazis, a poignant reflection of the atrocities witnessed during that period. Furthermore, the inclusion of photographs within the narrative serves as tangible evidence of historical truth, grounding “Maus” in the reality of Vladek's tale. Additionally, Spiegelman's portrayal of a potential future, where his book achieves commercial success, raises thought-provoking questions about the commodification of personal narratives and the complexities of authorship. Through these intricately woven elements, Spiegelman delivers a powerful and poignant commentary on the Holocaust and its enduring impact on both individuals and society.

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