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Exploring Memory and Consequence in *Maus* through Visual Symbol Counterparts from the Perspective of Trauma Theory

Ying Liao

Chongqing University of Finance and Economics, Chongqing, China.

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***Corresponding author:** Ying Liao, Chongqing University of Finance and Economics, Chongqing, China.

Abstract

Trauma Theory was developed by scholars who studied on veterans of Vietnam War and trauma refers to the mentality and emotional response of people who experienced overwhelming events that cannot be erased from their memory easily. In light of Trauma Theory, this article explores Memory and Consequence in *Maus*, a two-volume graphic novel by Art Spiegelman. It is pointed out that the symbol "wire fences" in the war stands for confinement to Vladek with regard to his physical and psychological status because he kept living under the trauma and could not return to normal life; the "chimney smoke" symbolizes the brutality of the war, while "Art's cigarette smoke" represents Art's connection and disconnection with the war as a child of victims; although Art was born after the war, his parents, as victims of the war, could not provide him with proper care and love, resulting in that he is also obsessed by trauma developed from his unhappy early stage and alienation from his parents.

Keywords

Graphic novel, *Maus*, Trauma Theory, visual symbols

Maus is a two-volume graphic novel of Art Spiegelman, in which the survival story of Art's father during World War II is narrated through the interpretation of the author. While there are studies involving traumatic impact for Vladek and Art such as "The Shoah Goes on and on Remembrance and Representation in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*" (Staub 1995), "Forced Confessions: The Case of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*" (Budick, 2001) and "Intergenerational transmission of trauma in spiegelman's *Maus*" (Kolar, 2013), they rarely explore it in light of visual symbols. In this paper, therefore, I will show how trans-time-and-space visual symbol counterparts (symbols both showing up during and after the event) in *Maus* — wire fences erected by German and wire fences of Pines (the hotel); smoke coming out from chimney of Auschwitz and Art's cigarette smoke — reveal the memory of the genocide and the trauma it inflicts on the victims and the second generation from the perspective of Trauma Theory.

1. Theoretical Frames

The concept of Trauma Theory was proposed by scholars who studied on Vietnam War veterans in 1970s. Then, basing on previous studies, Cathy Caruth defined trauma as the thing "describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (Caruth, 1996, p.11). In other words, trauma is the mentality and emotional response of someone who has experienced overwhelming events that constantly haunt them for quite a long period or even throughout one's life.

2. Graphic Novel and Visual Symbols

Since *Maus* is a typical graphic novel and visual symbols in it are to be discussed in understanding the event and its victims' trauma, reasons why graphic novel requires special attention and why it is helpful for understanding implicit messages of the story along with its visual symbols are briefly introduced here.

Generally, the graphic novel is used to refer to novels written by the combination of words and images. While many hold that graphic novel is easy to read without any effort — ideal reading material for children — I prefer the idea that it requires medication and insight to decode images in it, especially the visual symbols, thus readers can grasp sophisticated implications of those images instead of just reading the texts and scanning images hastily. As O'Brien once comments: "The drawing was itself a kind of sign language, or rebus, or logo. What happened from frame to frame was always in transition, and one aspect of that transition was a sense of word and picture in turn handing off the burden of meaning to one another…" (qtd. in Larsson 2007, p.124). Therefore, reading graphic novels demands deliberation to grasp implicitmessages hidden in those images or symbols which deserve due attention and exploration.

3. Visual Symbols Counterparts in *Maus*

As a graphic novel, *Maus* features sophisticated and arresting visual representations. On top of its most famed inhuman character depictions and a painting style of alienation, visual symbols merit particular attention and study, which boast multilayer connotations waiting to be explored to understand the novel better. On a closer observation, several visual symbols show up during and after the war respectively in pairs, echoing each other while serving to provide insights for readers to comprehend the traumatic experience and traumatic symptoms of victims and their descendants. As opposed to isolated symbols, these symbol counterparts bridge between the "overwhelming experience" and "(victims') response" (concepts of Cathy Caruth's definition towards trauma mentioned above), making it possible for us to explore elements accountable for the formation of trauma and victims' emotional response by analyzing contrast or connection represented by these symbol counterparts.

Symbol counterparts to be discussed in this paper include wire fences erected by German and wire fences of Pines (the hotel); smoke coming out from chimney of Auschwitz and Art's cigarette smoke. In the following part, these symbol pairs are to be inspected and interpreted in terms of the representation of the catastrophic event and symptoms of victims inflicted by the war in light of Trauma Theory.

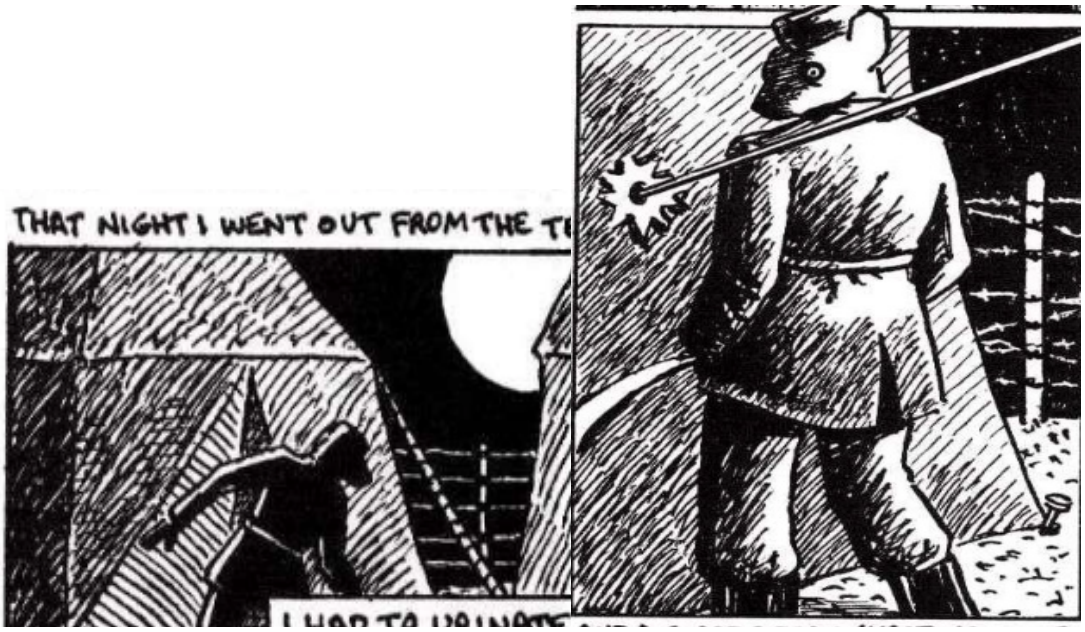

Figure 1. Detail from Art Spiegelman.

Wire Fences and Vladek's Irritating Frugality and Craftiness. In the first place, wire fences erected by German stands for Nazi's vicious power and symbolizes the deprivation of Jews' freedom, reflecting the prisoners' misera-

ble state. After Vladek was arrested by Nazi, he went out from the tent to urinate and a guard started to shoot him (Spiegelman *Maus I* 62). Beside him, the barbed wire was conspicuous for it is depicted as white against the sheer darkness of night (Fig. 1). Since Vladek was almost shot during the urination, it is not hard to imagine he would definitely be shot if he dared to transgress the wire. And I think the image of wire is stressed by Art for the barbed wire is drawn as black in daytime, and the author deliberately changes it into white in night, highlighting the its role of confinement and suppression. The confinement of wire extends physical confinement to psychological confinement, which makes the catastrophe a haunting experience for its victims.

On the other hand, wire fences of Pines (the hotel) serves as an ironic counterpart of the wire erected by German. Spiegelman always trespasses (trespassing in the war would be shot)" the wire fences in which a billboard reads "GUESTS ONLY, No Trespassing" to get free service in the hotel (Spiegelman *Maus II* 36), because he was reluctant to pay for it, and Spirgelman's unbearable frugality is the trauma of the war, for the catastrophe has never been erased from his memory and he kept maximizing all the resources around him just like in those tough days. According to Caruth (1995, p. 148), trauma is uncontrollable and delayed, which cannot be correctly recognized by the victims, whose normal lives will be disturbed by constant recurrence of traumatic memory. For Vladek, the war totally changed him, and he became an extremely economical miser, enjoying free services of the hotel by using his craftiness which is the quality made him survive the war. Vladek got shaped by the war but he probably didn't realize it, or more accurately, he couldn't control it, which is quite pathetic and ironic as he would never do things like this before the war when he owned factories and was economically affluent. In other words, the trauma of the event is never erased from his minds and he gets trapped in it just as the psychological confinement imposed by the wire set by German.

Figure 2. The Chimneys.

Smoke and Traumatic Feelings of the Second Generation. To begin with, the chimney smoke is a major symbol in *Maus*. The smoke, coming out of the chimney of the concentration camp and drawn as black hatching in a dense fashion (Fig. 2), represents people tortured in the war, because it was in the camp that Jews were burned and thus the very smoke from the chimney stands for their lost lives. "The image (smoke) … is one of the emblematic images and is indeed a strong invitation to indexical reading" (Orbán, 2007, p.69). Against the black smoke from chimney in Auschwitz, Spiegelman's thoughts read: "Abraham I didn't see again… I think he came out the chimney" (Fig. 2) (Spiegelman *Maus II* 27). Thus the thoughts of Spiegelman further indicate smoke serving as the symbol of the loss of life, in other words, Spiegelman reckoned Abraham had been slaughtered and burned, and his soul came out of the chimney with countless lives of his race, forming the dark and depressing smoke extending to the sky.

Figure 3. The Cigarette Smoke.

Another kind of smoke — Art's cigarette smoke is the counterpart to be discussed here. It is noted that the cigarette smoke constantly appears throughout the novel, and the color of it draws a huge contrast with the chimney smoke: white (Fig. 3). I think the implication of cigarette smoke is quite complicated, demonstrating Art's connection and disconnection with the trauma. Firstly, the whitening of the smoke is a symbol of the detached mentality of the next generation of the victims, and the blankness of the smoke symbolizes the inadequacy of understanding when the children like Art want to sympathize with their victimized parents but only to find themselves falling short of doing that. On the other hand, the connection lies in that the cigarette smoke and chimney smoke share resemblance in the appearance irrespective of the color, and to some extent, the former is a miniature of the latter in different space and time, signifying Art's connection with the event. According to Freud's trauma theory, experiences in childhood and adolescence play a vital role in the formation of trauma (qtd. in Zhao, 2009), and Art's spiritual trauma is closely related to his family. Since the cigarette smoke indicates Art's connection with the truma, an inspection of his childhood will shed light on how Art inherits the trauma of his parents. Art grew up in a family where the parents were survivors and the elder brother died in the war. He has tense relationship with his parents who were tortured by trauma and failed to provide Art meticulous care and love, which can be learned from Anja's questioning of Art: "You still love me… Don't you?" (Spiegelman *Maus I* 103) and Spiegelman's cold words when Art turned to him for help: "If you lock them together in a room with no food for a week… Then you could see what it is, friends! ..." (Spiegelman *Maus I* 5). In other words, Anja and Spiegelman never got rid of the trauma for their whole life and failed to come back to the normal track of life, and to some extent they were deprived of the ability to love and care. Therefore, Art's childhood is unhappy and although as a child born after the war (the disconnection), Art indeed suffers from trauma developed since his childhood and it continues haunting them and can never be escaped from (the connection).

4. Conclusion

From examining visual symbol counterparts "smoke" and "wire", and exploring their meaning and connotation in light of trauma theory, this paper shows both the memory of the event and the trauma it left on its victims like Vladek, Anja and Art. On one hand, the symbol "wire fences set by German" represents physical and psychological confinement to Vladek, while "wire fences of Pines" shows how the trauma constantly perplexed and tortured him because Vladek failed to return to normal life after the catastrophe and kept being crafty and economical just like he was still in the war. On the other hand, the "chimney smoke" signifies deceased Jewish demonstrating the brutality of the war, while "Art's cigarette smoke" represents Art's connection and disconnection with the event, because although Art doesn't experience the war, as a child grew up in a family where meticulous love and attention were absent, he is also obsessed by trauma developed from his unhappy early stage and alienation from his parents. All in all, *Maus* provides us the approach to learn about survivors and their families, and more care and attention should be given this special group.

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