[Your Name]

[Instructor Name]

[Course Number]

[Date]

The Problem with Heroes

The popular conception of the hero is one that does not allow much space for realism. Heroes are, above all, the individuals who manage to face and defeat adversity due to a combination of skills and attributes. Most often than not, courage, bravery, and justice are clearly exhibited by the heroes of common lore. In Spiegelman's *Maus* books, though, it might not be possible to reduce the role of the characters to that of heroes or villains. If the focus falls on Art and Vladek, then trying to portray either of them as heroes does not fit well with the nature of each character. There are external circumstances to consider, as well, like the main conflict around which it revolves and the medium in which it is presented, to understand the necessary rejection of the label. However, this rejection does not entail that the characters are lacking in virtue or great accomplishments. Reality, though, is a bit too complex to be turned into such a simplistic dichotomy, where people are either heroes or they’re not.

In “Maus: My Father Bleeds History” and “Maus: And Here my Troubles Began”, chronicle the struggles of Art Spiegelman and his father, Vladek, as they come to terms with their lives, each other, and their histories. A biographical, but fictionalized account of the author’s life, tackles the survival of his family during the Second World War, and the generational differences that such an atrocity had generated between he and his father. The story, one that deals with the devastation of genocide, was presented with the use of mice and cat and characters, which can, on occasion, lead to an overly-fictionalized reading of the encounters. The use of anthropomorphized animals might create a false sense of levity, but this does not eliminate the permanence of the actions portrayed. Unlike popular heroes, who manage to overcome their obstacles at the story’s end. For Art’s father, however, being a survivor of the Holocaust, along with his wife, meant that his problems were not going to end with the conflict. To both of their misfortune, the effects of the war will follow them through their relationship, with no clear “happily ever after” in sight.

Vladek Spiegelman is, along with Art, one of the protagonists of the tale. He is the father of the author, the man who survived the Holocaust. With his wife, he had to find intelligent and dangerous methods of remaining alive. He had to live through one of the worst atrocities in history, while having to care for his wife and, eventually, his son. Art, because he was a child during the height of the conflict, does not remember much of the Holocaust. As a result, both have very different perspectives on life. This becomes clear from the very first encounter that is shown between father and son, in “My Father Bleeds History”. Art walks goes to his father to explain that he has been crying because he tripped on his skates and his friends were mocking him for it. His father’s response immediately escalates the situation: “Friends? Friends? Your friends? If you lock them together in a room with no food for a week . . . THEN you could see what it is, friends!” (6). While Vladek’s outbursts can certainly seem understandable, from an outsider’s perspective, the way in which his son reacts to his approach is entirely different. Art has been reliving the Holocaust with his father, willingly and unwillingly. Both were inextricably linked to the conflict, but for completely different reasons.

For a child, these outbursts were a constant reminder that there was a massive generational gap between them. His father had been hurt so deeply by events that he could not even imagine, that it was almost impossible for them to relate. The response to his friends’ mockings, only served to minimize the feelings that the boy was feeling at the moment. Obviously, the events the boy had lived would not compare to what had to be endured by his parents, but his pain, though insignificant in the grand scheme of things, should still be valid and admissible. As a result, Art grows up feeling guilty. Unlike his parents, he could only relate to their suffering through their retellings, not through a direct involvement or participation in it. He did not go through the events and, in one occasion, he mentions to Francoise: “I know this is insane, but I somehow wish I had been in Auschwitz *with* my parents so I could really know what they lived through!” (176). This conflict is influenced by his father’s response to his pains and his successes. Vladek, and all of his characters flaw, had contributed to the creation of an atmosphere that caused discomfort within his home.

Art’s father, though, is more than just the negative impressions he had left on his son. Before and during the war, Vladek exhibits the characteristics that would be found in almost any conventional hero. He finds clever ways to survive, intelligent and quick-witted solutions to problems that would unexpected arise. He has the forethought to tell his wife to pack her expensive, but useless possessions, to be sold at more dire times. He spends his time trying to fight the horrors that he had to see, to stop them from becoming a permanent scar in him. After all, his wife relied on his strength and resilience. She would come to him for comfort and he would often oblige, even though there was not a person in whom he could lean to discuss his own afflictions and suffering.

When the objective actions of Nazi Germany against the Jewish people are considered, expecting someone to emerge unscathed from their persecution is unfair. And Art tries to relate to his father through the amalgamation of emotions that he had to live through. During the process, though, they both are presented as flawed and complicated individuals, who have done their share of right and wrong actions throughout their lives, who have a grey morality system that drives their responses to one another. Neither of them is the hero, not even Vladek as a survivor -- and what would that say about those who didn’t survive, were they not heroes, too? The protagonists of Maus, Art and Vladek, are neither heroes nor villains, as their stories did not finalize with simplistic happiness. They lived beyond these positions, to become a part of a raw and realistic depiction of the aftermath of the Holocaust.

Works Cited:

Spiegelman, Art. Maus: A Survivor’s Tale. My Father Bleeds History. 1973. New York: Pantheon Books, 1986. Print.

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