

ENGLISH: *THE COMPLETE MAUS*

‘Maus is a novel about the baggage we carry.’

In the course of a journey, it is necessary to carry baggage, a solitary piece of equipment that contains vital utensils that will be used in this journey. Before embarking on the journey, preparations must be made into choosing items to place in this baggage. Subsequently, during the course of the journey, this baggage can become one of two things: a heavy burden that continuously hinders your progress or an indispensable resource that the journey would be impossible without. In reading *Maus*, it can be seen that the graphic novel mirrors these aspects, where the preparation is the Holocaust and the journey is life. More importantly, though, is the role of past memories, experiences, feelings, knowledge in the course of life in both a positive and negative fashion. It is also apparent that Art Spiegelman’s ‘luggage’ was not prepared solely by himself, but ‘items’ were passed on from his father.

The Holocaust was undoubtedly a devastating event and some aspects of Vladek’s life seem to be the unfortunate consequences of such an event. It must follow, therefore, that the Holocaust was Vladek’s preparation for his journey of life. To take this concept one step further, the Holocaust is the justification for the way Vladek is at the time of retelling his story. One of the items is, obviously, his personality change. It can be seen that at the outset of Vladek’s retelling, Vladek is a social, easy to talk to and particularly resourceful person. Even Art concedes that Vladek was ‘amazingly present-minded and resourceful.’ In contrast, he could not be any more different at the time of the retelling of his life. The present Vladek is antisocial and is not able to relate to anyone. His own son can barely stand to be around him, except to listen to his stories. It seems that his relationship with the world is clouded by misunderstanding and barriers that are unfortunately forged by Vladek himself. Furthermore, his resourcefulness has disappeared and been replaced with an extreme stinginess. Mala remarks that he is ‘more attracted to things than people’. He picks up things from the street that he says that he will use in the future, but as the readers and Art can see, he is only picking these things up for the sake of it. It seems unfortunate but this personality change is an item that has been retained from the Holocaust.

However, arguably, a more prevalent item in Vladek’s baggage is his guilt. In various parts of the novel, it is obvious that Vladek suffers from survivor’s guilt, that is guilt experienced by survivors for surviving rather than dying. Survivor’s guilt mainly stems from the fallacious idea that ‘it’s admirable to survive... [and]...it’s NOT admirable to NOT survive.’ Vladek has placed on himself a heavy burden in response to the losses of his friends and, most importantly, his family. In the case of Anja, Vladek seems guilty that she died and not him because of the fact that Anja was the one who had allowed Vladek to survive. In many of the predicaments that Vladek was in, money enabled him to slither his way through and this money was sourced from marrying into Anja’s family (notice the dollar sign with Vladek marries Anja). When Anja died, Vladek’s reaction exemplified the emotional attachment he had to Anja. The heavy burden of guilt is also another item that Vladek has carried into his life.

The graphic novel also went into great detail into Art and his baggage. His baggage was, in a sense, ‘prepacked’. Vladek ‘took his guilt on [Art]...the REAL survivor’. Art regrets the fact that his baggage was ‘prepacked’ but he also regrets the fact that he can never really understand the guilt that his father has passed onto him, because he can never really understand the events of the Holocaust. He does not really know how he should use his items, that is his father’s memories and the survivor’s guilt that his father imparted on him which can be seen when he shows his confusion over ‘becoming successful’ over what his father had left him. Nevertheless, the guilt is inescapable. This is symbolically represented when his father throws away Art’s old coat and gives him a new one. Again, this shows Art’s frustration on the passed down guilt, but, more importantly, it shows that his father’s influences at times, overcome his own free will.

In Maus, it is clear that all characters, not solely Vladek or Art, carry some form of baggage or another. Of course, the preparation process is not always one's control, as can be seen for Vladek and Art. However, what Maus seems to say is that we should see these items, these influences from past events, simply for what they are items that can be used and manipulated for, possibly, the good of one and all.