*Maus* Teaching Objectives

Joan Williams

Knoxville Catholic High School

 Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* has been the cornerstone of my Holocaust Literature unit for seven years*.* This Pulitzer Prize-winning nonfiction account of Art’s parents, Vladek and Anja, allows students to view a very familiar portion of history in a new and meaningful light. *Maus* is written in the form of a graphic novel, and the comic book appearance of the story is an attention-grabber for students who are used to traditional novels. Spiegelman illustrates all the Jewish characters in his narrative as mice; all Germans are cats, and all non-Jewish Polish citizens are pigs. This visual approximation of the many cultural stereotypes rampant in Germany in the pre-war era makes *Maus* somewhat controversial and singular amongst Holocaust literature.

The nontraditional telling of a nonfiction story incites student debate from the very first page; initially, they are taken aback, and wonder if these images are in themselves racist. As they realize that this reflects the dangerous current of public prejudice and perception in the early 1930s, they begin to discuss the disturbing ease with which they adapt to thinking of people merely as animals. *Maus* forces the students to transcend their basic understanding of the Holocaust and see it in a much more individual light.

However, the classroom impact of *Maus* goes beyond the graphic format; students are interested by the difficult relationship between father and son, as well as the notion of “surviving a survivor”. As the story is nonfiction, characters are frankly depicted, which allows us to have a discussion about how the Holocaust impacted real people, not idealized fictive characters. At its heart, *Maus* is a tale with two aims: it relates the astounding depth of Vladek and Anja Spiegelman’s love for each other in the midst of war and genocide, and Art’s struggle to understand his parents in the postwar generation.

1. The primary goal of this unit is to give students a deep critical understanding of the Holocaust—to dispel their easy generalizations and misconceptions, and provide them with a solid foundation to understand the most important historical event of the 20th century.
	1. For more information, please see the USHMM packet.
	2. Students will:
		1. Raise/consider key questions regarding the Holocaust
		2. Analyze man’s inhumanity to man
		3. Recognize that racial slurs and stereotypes are stepping stones to oppression
		4. Recognize the threat of genocide as a threat to humanity
		5. Understand that bystanders are making an active choice that may result in harm to others
		6. Understand the history of prejudice—and understand that it still thrives
		7. Understand the dangers of blind obedience to authority
		8. Understand that moral courage by individuals can make a difference
		9. Carry a message of humanitarianism so that these acts will not happen again
2. Students will read, write, listen, and speak for…
	1. literary response and expression. Students will read and listen to oral, written, and electronically produced texts and performances, relate texts and performances to their own lives, and develop an understanding of the diverse social, historical, and cultural dimensions the texts and performances represent. As speakers and writers, students will use oral and written language for self-expression and artistic creation.
	2. Critical analysis and evaluation. As listeners and readers, students will analyze experiences, ideas, information, and issues presented by others using a variety of established criteria. As speakers and writers, they will present, in oral and written language and from a variety of perspectives, their opinions and judgments on experiences, ideas, information and issues.
	3. Social interaction. Students will use oral and written language for effective social communication with a wide variety of people. As readers and listeners, they will use the social communications of others to enrich their understanding of people and their views.
3. Establishment of nonfiction narrative as a literary genre
	1. See survivor testimony assignment
4. Establishment of the graphic novel as a literary genre
	1. See graphic novel analysis assignment
5. Argumentative timed essay
	1. See Auschwitz assignment
6. Literary devices
	1. Allegory
	2. Symbolism
		1. Superficiality of the racial construct, connecting to racism and stereotypes in the Holocaust
		2. Art’s frequent use of the “mask” when writing after his father’s death
	3. Imagery
		1. Road as swastika
		2. Art’s writing desk on the pile of bodies
	4. Caricature
	5. Irony
		1. Vladek’s racism
		2. Vladek’s dictatorial qualities
		3. Anja’s suicide
		4. Richieu
		5. Anja’s diaries
	6. Reliability of narrator
		1. Vladek’s frustrating qualities are filtered through his annoyed son
		2. Is Art a reliable narrator? How does he portray himself?
		3. Identity—who is Art in relation to his father? How do the two men differ in identifying themselves?