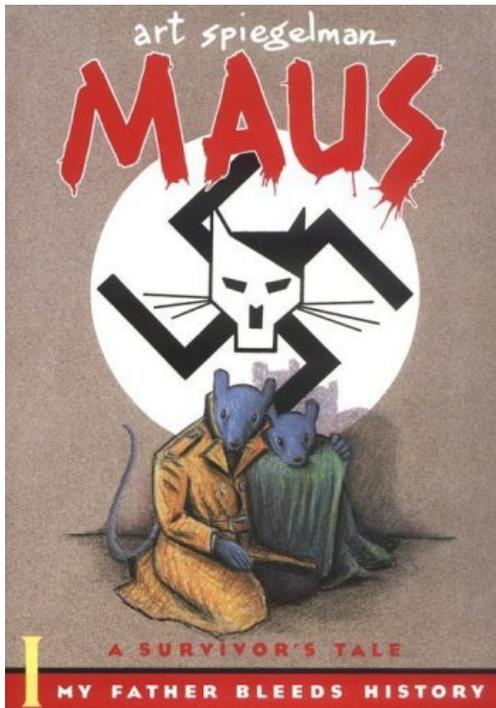


Maus

Literature Guide



Teaching Art Spiegelman's *Maus* offers a unique opportunity to explore complex themes through a medium that's accessible yet profound: graphic novels. *Maus* is not just a Holocaust story—it's about memory, family, and survival. Through the study of this graphic novel, students will explore how history is remembered and told, and how personal trauma shapes identities across generations. The subject matter can be emotionally intense for students, so teachers should encourage a safe space for discussion and reflection.

Grade Levels: 9-12

Essential Question:

How can the format of storytelling affect the author's ability to convey the message of the work and improve their connection with the intended audience?

Objectives:

- Students will describe the Holocaust and its impact on European Jews.
- Students will analyze the themes of trauma, memory, and survival in *Maus*.
- Students will interpret the impact of Spiegelman's use of the graphic novel format to tell a historical narrative.
- Students will examine the relationships between characters and discuss how family history and personal trauma shape identity.
- Students will evaluate the symbolism of animals and its role in representing race and power dynamics.

In this literature guide, you will find:

- Introduction
 - Contextualizing the Holocaust
 - Overview of the Graphic Novel Format
 - Key Themes to Explore
 - Narrative Structure
 - Ethical Considerations in Representation
 - Exploring Character and Relationships
- Creative Assignments
- Discussion and Writing Questions
- Additional Materials

Introduction

About the Author: Art Spiegelman, born on February 15, 1948, in Stockholm, Sweden, is a pioneering American cartoonist and graphic novelist. He is best known for his groundbreaking work *Maus*, a graphic novel that chronicles the Holocaust through the experiences of his father, Vladek Spiegelman, and the use of animals as metaphors for different races and nationalities. *Maus* won a Pulitzer Prize in 1992, making Spiegelman one of the first comic artists to receive such an honor. Spiegelman began his career in the underground comic scene of the 1960s and 1970s, contributing to publications like *RAW*, which he co-founded with his wife, Francoise Mouly. His work often blends personal history with broader cultural and historical themes, such as in *In the Shadow of No Towers*, which reflects on the emotional and societal impact of the September 11 attacks. Spiegelman's innovative approach has made him a key figure in elevating graphic novels to a respected literary form.

Contextualizing the Holocaust

- *Define the Holocaust* (as defined by USHMM):
 - The Holocaust was the systematic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of six million European Jews by the Nazi German regime and its allies and collaborators. The Holocaust was an evolving process that took place throughout Europe between 1933 and 1945.
- *Background on the Holocaust:* Before diving into the novel, it's essential to provide students with a historical understanding of the Holocaust. Cover topics like antisemitism in Europe, the rise of the Nazi regime, the implementation of the Final Solution, and the experiences of Jews during World War II. Use readings and materials from this on-line resource guide to provide the necessary background information. The placement of events from the timeline activity of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum around the classroom would provide a good visual reference.
- *Personal Narratives:* Spiegelman tells the story of his father, Vladek, a Holocaust survivor. It's helpful to discuss why personal narratives like Vladek's are powerful in understanding history. There are many oral testimonies of survivors available on the *Yad Vashem* or *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*. The film

Testimony of the Human Spirit available in this resource compilation features six Holocaust survivors.

- *Geographic Comprehension*: Showing students the map of Poland during World War II provides a context for the novel.
- *Discussion*: How can history be represented in different mediums (literature, film, visual art)? What impact does this have on our understanding of history?

Overview of the Graphic Novel Format

- *The Medium of Comics*: Introduce students to the graphic novel as a literary and artistic form. Discuss how visual storytelling (panels, layouts, pacing) differs from prose and other traditional forms of narrative.
- *Why a Graphic Novel for This Story?* Art Spiegelman uses anthropomorphism (animal allegory: Jews as mice, Germans as cats, Poles as pigs) to represent different groups during the Holocaust. Why might he have chosen to do this? Explore the symbolism and metaphor in this choice and ask students how it affects their reading of such a heavy topic.
- *Visual Analysis*: Encourage students to analyze the use of black-and-white illustrations, panel transitions, and the interplay between text and image. Explore how the black-and-white art style reflects the dark themes of the story. How do the illustrations reinforce or contrast with the text? How does Spiegelman use visual metaphors?

Key Themes to Explore

- *Survival and Trauma*: One of the central themes of *Maus* is the trauma of Holocaust survivors, which is explored through Vladek Spiegelman's recollections. Discuss the psychological toll of survival, and how it impacts Vladek and Art's relationship. How does intergenerational trauma manifest in the text? Discuss how survival stories are complicated by guilt, memory, and trauma.
- *Memory and Representation*: The novel questions the limits of memory and representation. How does Art's relationship with his father affect how the Holocaust is remembered and retold? How reliable is memory as a historical source?
- *Guilt and Legacy*: Art wrestles with feelings of guilt, both for not having experienced the Holocaust himself and for profiting from his father's trauma. This theme opens up discussions about survivor's guilt and inherited trauma and the ways future generations deal with historical atrocities.

Narrative Structure

- *Dual Narrative*: *Maus* intertwines Vladek's past experiences with the Holocaust and Art's present-day relationship with his father. Discuss the effect of this structure on readers and the way it brings the past into dialogue with the present.
- *Metafiction* is a form of fiction that emphasizes its own narrative structure in a way that inherently reminds the audience that they are reading or viewing a

fictional work. Art's struggle with creating *Maus* is part of the story. You can discuss how Spiegelman blurs the line between history and storytelling, reality and fiction, and how this impacts the reader's perception.

Ethical Considerations in Representation

- *The Challenge of Representation*: Discuss the difficulty of representing the Holocaust in literature and art. How does *Maus* balance the need for accuracy with the limitations of any attempt to convey such horrors? How does Spiegelman handle the ethical challenges of representing one of the darkest chapters in human history? Discuss the fine line between documenting atrocities and sensationalizing them.
- *Cultural Responsibility*: Talk about how Spiegelman takes responsibility in telling his father's story and how students should approach reading and discussing such sensitive material with respect.
- *Animal Allegory*: How does using animals to depict different ethnic and national groups work to Spiegelman's advantage? Does it trivialize the subject of the Holocaust or does it serve a deeper symbolic purpose?

Exploring Character and Relationships

- *Vladek and Art's Relationship*: The strained father-son dynamic is crucial to the novel. Vladek's compulsive behaviors (such as hoarding and frugality) can be linked to his wartime experiences. How does trauma affect not only the survivor but also their family?
- *Anja's Story*: Anja, Art's mother, died by suicide in 1968, and her absence looms large throughout *Maus*. Her struggles with mental illness and the impact of losing family members during the war provide an additional layer to the discussion of Holocaust trauma.

Creative Assignments

- *Art and Reflection*: Have students create their own visual representations of a theme or chapter from *Maus* and explain their artistic choices.
- *Journal Reflections*: Encourage students to keep a journal while reading to track their thoughts on how the story evolves, both in terms of Vladek's experiences and Art's storytelling.
- *Research Assignment*: On page 33, a character says, "There's a pogrom going on in Germany today." The Random House Dictionary defines "pogrom," a word of Russian origin, as "an organized massacre, especially of Jews." Elsewhere it defines "the Holocaust" as "the systematic mass slaughter of European Jews in Nazi concentration camps during World War II." How well do these definitions describe the events through which Vladek Spiegelman lived? Using independent research, describe the difference between a pogrom and the Holocaust. Why are

such words—along with others like "victim," "survivor," and "genocide"—considered controversial today?

- *Reflective Writing Prompt:*
 - How does *Maus* affect your understanding of history compared to traditional textbooks?
 - Is it ethical to represent the Holocaust in comic format? Why or why not? What are the strengths and limitation of using animals to represent different ethnicities?
 - What is the impact of intergenerational trauma in the novel?
 - How does the father-son relationship mirror or contrast with relationships in your own life?
 - The situation of Polish Jews worsens steadily and dramatically throughout *Maus*, a deterioration that is aptly summed up by the chapter heading "The Noose Tightens." Chart the progress of this escalation, citing specific incidents in the book. What happens to Spiegelman's mice as they are forced deeper into "mouse holes"? In what way do they become more "mouse-like"? How might they have responded differently if the Germans had begun their program of mass extermination from the start?

Discussion and Writing Questions

Prologue

1. What is your first impression of Vladek Spiegelman?
2. What does his remark about friends suggest about his personality?
3. How does it foreshadow revelations later in the book?

Chapter 1: The Sheik

1. How does Art Spiegelman introduce his relationship with his father, Vladek?
2. How long has it been since Artie last visited his father? What do you think is responsible for their separation?
3. On page 12 we see a close-up of Vladek as he pedals his exercise bicycle. What is the meaning of the numbers tattooed on his wrist? How does this single image manage to convey information that might occupy paragraphs of text?
4. What does Vladek's story about his past relationships reveal about his personality?
5. How does the comic's visual style reflect the emotions of the characters?

Chapter 2: The Honeymoon

1. How does Vladek describe his early experiences in the Polish army?
2. What are some of the first signs of rising anti-Semitism in the chapter?
3. How does Vladek's resourcefulness begin to emerge in his survival story?

Chapter 3: Prisoner of War

1. How does Vladek's experience as a prisoner of war highlight the differences in how different groups were treated?
2. What is the meaning of the beard and skullcap that Vladek's father is shown wearing in the panels on page 46? What happens to his beard later on?
3. In what ways does Vladek's ingenuity help him survive the POW camp?
4. How does Vladek arrange to be reunited with his wife and son? What visual device does Spiegelman use to show him disguising himself as a Polish Gentile?
5. How does Spiegelman use the animal metaphor (mice, cats, pigs) to depict different groups in society?

Chapter 4: The Noose Tightens

1. Describe the activities depicted in the family dinner scene on pages 74-76. What do they tell you about the Zylberbergs?
2. Although Jews were allowed only limited rations under the Nazi occupation, Vladek manages to circumvent these restrictions for a while. What methods does he use to support himself and his family?
3. During the brutal mass arrest depicted on page 80, Vladek is framed by a panel shaped like a Jewish star. How does this device express his situation at that moment?
4. What happened to little Richieu? When Vladek begins telling this story on page 81, the first three rows of panels are set in the past, while the bottom three panels return us to the present and show the old Vladek pedaling his stationary bicycle. Why do you think Spiegelman chooses to conclude this anecdote in this manner?
5. What happened to Vladek's father? What does the scene on pages 90-91 suggest about the ways in which some Jews died and others survived?

Chapter 5: Mouse Holes

1. This chapter and the one that follows both have the word "mouse" in their titles. And, in fact, in the concluding sections of this book Spiegelman's mice seem to become more "mouse-like." How does the author accomplish this? What reason might he have for doing so?
2. How does Anja's mental health affect her actions in the chapter?
3. Describe the strategies that Vladek used to conceal Anja and himself during the liquidation of the ghetto. How did the Germans flush them from hiding?
4. What do the various hiding places in this chapter symbolize?
5. What eventually happens to the "mouse" who informed on the Spiegelmans? What becomes of Haskel, who refused to save Vladek's in-laws even though he accepted their jewels?
6. How does Art's discussion with his father about his mother's diaries add to our understanding of their relationship?
7. Why does Spiegelman place a swastika in the background of the panels that depict the plight of Jews in Hitler's Germany (p. 33)? Why, on page 125, is the

road that Vladek and Anja travel on their way back to Sosnowiec also shaped like a swastika? What other symbolic devices does the author use in this book?

Chapter 6: Mouse Trap

1. What does Vladek mean when he says that reading Artie's comic makes him "interested" in his own story (p. 133)? Is this statement just a product of broken English, or does it reveal some deeper truth about what happens when we record our personal histories?
2. On page 136 Vladek says that he was able to pass for a member of the Gestapo but that Anja's appearance was more Jewish. What visual device does Spiegelman use to show the difference between them? How does Vladek's family attempt to escape capture, and what ultimately leads to their betrayal?
3. What role do Polish smugglers play in Vladek and Anja's fate?
4. On page 149 Vladek is almost betrayed by a group of schoolchildren. What stories did Poles tell their children about Jews? How do you think such stories—and perhaps similar stories told by German parents—helped pave the way for the Final Solution?
5. How does Spiegelman build suspense in the final moments of the chapter?

Additional Materials

- *Maus Now: Art Spiegelman in Conversation with Hillary Chute*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JlcpSFS_6fl
- *Art Spiegelman: Disaster is My Muse (2025)*
<https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/art-spiegelman-documentary/35215/>