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The Comic Tragedy

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The Interactions of Present and Past Frames in *Maus: Part One*

In the graphic novel *Maus*, by Art Spiegelman, past and present are intimately tied together as the narrative takes place in both present, during Art’s interviews with his father, and the past, with the illustrations of Vladek’s story. Due to the medium of graphic novels, often the past and present are illustrated on the same page and even intercede. In *Maus*, though past and present are represented on the same page, most pages feature frames that separate the present slightly from the past; however, there are some frames that are more interconnected with their features. With frames overlapping, mirroring, and even interceding each other, the stories being told become intertwined.

The first instance of a present frame overlaying a past frame is on page 15 when Vladek is riding his stationary bicycle with a huge poster for a film mounted behind him. The dialogue in the frame has Vladek saying, “People always told me I looked like Rudolph Valentino” as he faces the same way as the actor in the poster, perhaps showing the comparison of Vladek and Valentino. Vladek is stationary in the present, but, like the wheel of the bicycle, he is moving into the past with his deeper recollections of his life before the Holocaust. In the frame, Vladek almost looks as if he is going to speed right into the frames of him dancing with Lucia as he slowly becomes immersed in his flashbacks.

Pages 81, 83, and 93 also feature Vladek on his stationary bicycle interacting with the past frames. On page 81, Vladek, while biking, mentions that a year has passed in his story since the previous page. His biking represents this passing of time as the next frame continues the story a year after the previous frame. This idea of the bicycle being the passer of time flows through this chapter. Page 83 has Vladek riding the bicycle only to stop when he refers to Richieu’s death after he and Anja had given him away to hide. Vladek’s pause in biking expresses the power of his memories of having to say goodbye to his son and to then never he see him again. The next time a full body shot of Vladek on the bicycle is shown, on page 93, Vladek is hunched over the seat and appears exhausted. This frame comes after Vladek’s telling of the separating of people to the “good side” and the “bad side.” His crushed state appears right after the frames detailing how his sister, her children, and his father came to the bad side, where “those on the bad side never came anymore home.” Vladek is not only exhausted from the exercising, but also from the onslaught of painful memories.

Just as Spiegelman uses the stationary bicycle to show travel through time and emotions, he also uses mirroring frames to reflect relationships in the present and past stories. On page 16, old Vladek and Art mirror the upper left corner image of young Vladek and Lucia. Art matches with Lucia because they are both interrupting Vladek, as Lucia stops him on his way to the market and Art stops Vladek’s story with an interjection. Young and old Vladek are both turned to the right with slightly annoyed expressions, suggesting that Vladek may not have changed that much from his youth. Vladek’s personality remains similar throughout the novel, perhaps implying that Vladek has always been the way he is rather than he only became who he is due to the trauma of the Holocaust.

Another instance of mirroring happens on page 31, which features two different father and son interactions- old Vladek and Art and young Vladek and his father-in-law. The first and second frames of both conversations feature very similar body language. In the first frames, both the fathers are raising their right hands and gesturing at the sons; the second frames have the sons gesturing back with their left hands. The third frames both involve discussion of money, however, in these frames, Art and the father-in-law match in their calm regard towards the money and their cigarettes hanging from their mouths. Just as the father-in-law wanted to give some of his money to Vladek to use for a factory, Art (in later chapters) wants to give some of his money to help Vladek with his household expenses. With these similar frames, the theme of father and son relationships is subtly expressed.

Continuing with the theme of this type of relationship, in some frames Art becomes Vladek’s bridge or guide to the past. On page 47, Art is laying on the ground at his father’s feet. Art’s lower half of his body is laying in a frame set in the past when Vladek was a solider. In this way, Art is a direct conduit for the channeling of Vladek’s memories as his son continues to interview him. Similar to this frame, a frame on page 137 also has imagery that suggests Art connects Vladek with his past. The frame features Art and Vladek on either side of a frame that has young Vladek and Anja walking a pathway toward Sosnoweic. The path creatures an arrow that starts at Vladek and ends pointing at Art, showing the travels of Vladek’s tales to Art’s recording device. Using his son as his guide to the past, Vladek stays on course in sharing his stories from his life during the Holocaust. Both pages show the growing connection that forms between Art and his father as he hears about Vladek’s life leading up to and during the Holocaust.

Also shown on some pages is Vladek’s full re-emersion into his memories as he is fully incased in some frames that are set in the past. On page 107, Art and Vladek are both walking in the corner of a frame detailing Vladek’s time at an old village where all the Jews in Sosnoweic were moved. In this instance, Vladek has not only pulled himself back into his past, but he has brought Art in as well. Both father and son appear to be traveling from this frame and onto the next page where Vladek gives greater detail of what is happening in the village. This transition connects with idea that Art is Vladek’s guide or, perhaps, traveling mate in his storytelling. Another instance where old Vladek is merged with a past frame is on page 117. Vladek is standing in front of the window while, in the past, his father-in-law is crying outside the windowpane. Present Vladek is looking down and away from his father-in-law, as if even now Vladek is pained by the memory of seeing such a strong man tear at his hair and weep. This entire frame reveals that Anja’s father was taken away and, despite his fortune, died in the Holocaust. Perhaps Vladek is looking down as he feels some survivor’s guilt for having made it through the travesty.

Vladek’s story may take place in the past in the narrative of the novel, but both the past and present frames lay on the same page, which allows them to interact and influence each other. The pace of Vladek’s biking in chapter 4 gives a slightly different pacing to this chapter than to some of the other chapters. In a few instances, both Vladek and Art appear to mirroring, in their postures, people of Vladek’s past, with these present and past frames situated on the same page. Some frames even show Art as a way in which Vladek can access his past and share the dark memories. With some darker frames being overlaid and interceded by Vladek, Vladek’s full emersion back into his past can be shown. Every frame of every graphic novel is important, as each frame tells a small part of the story. In *Maus*, Art Spiegelman is able to manipulate these frames to express how his father Vladek feels in the present about his time before and during the Holocaust. With each frame on the same plane, the merging of past and present can, along with the emotions tied in both, fully emerge from the story. The deep connections of both types of frames allows Spiegelman to show that the story being told in the present is just as important as the one being told in the past.