

An Analysis of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* through  
Samuel Gerson's "When the Third is Dead"

以 Samuel Gerson 的第三者已死來分析 Art Spiegelman 的鼠族

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For traumatized victims of the Holocaust, the most painful experience is a lack of sympathetic others. This apathetic world, like an absent presence, never feels guilty about the survivors of the Holocaust. Even survivors and their children cannot understand each other. The concept of the "dead third" is helpful for investigating these troubled relationships. The notion of the dead third can also be tied to the notion of the "dead mother," because these two concepts both represent a kind of continuing absence. In this paper, I use the dead third and the dead mother to explore the relationship among Artie, Vladek, and Anja in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*.

The dead third exists diversely in different people's minds, and its influence is subjective and objective, conscious and unconscious. Hence, the relationship among Artie, Vladek, and Anja is very complicated because their mental situations are usually affected by other people and they do not know how to resolve it. The relationships between the three characters carry the signs of trauma. The relationship between Artie and Vladek is alienated because their suffering is different. Vladek is a survivor of the Holocaust; therefore, he has had vivid experiences of this horrible event. For him, the trauma of the Holocaust is direct. His fear is inexpressible. A traumatized people cannot release the pain and memories of the Holocaust when they try to recall it; such a terrible misfortune hurt him deeply. On the other hand, Artie is the child of a survivor of the Holocaust. He was absent from this event and its trauma reaches him indirectly. Never having existed during the Holocaust, the second generation only bear the after-effects which continue to haunt the first generation. Artie clings to his father and always asks for details of the Holocaust. He wants to form an identity for himself. In "Forced Confessions: The Case of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*," Emily Miller Budick argues that:

It places a barrier between the writer and the reader that preserves the difference between primary and secondary trauma, between the realness or actuality (in its horribleness) of the one experience and the unrealness and distant, distinctive, fictiveness, of the other. (392)

In *Maus*, the author intentionally provides a lot of context around Vladek and Anja's love story to depict that prior to the Holocaust, they have a happy life as normal people and they are not born victims or survivors. The author wants readers to understand that survivors of the Holocaust are ordinary humans as well. If this horrible incident had never happened, they would not be different from us. Vladek loves Anja very deeply and, when the war starts, together they overcome myriad difficulties to survive the Holocaust. Hence, their relationship is interdependent because Anja is the only one who can really understand Vladek's suffering in this world. This plot sequence offers the reason behind Vladek's powerful sorrow when he loses Anja. For Vladek, Anja's suicide is a second suffering, because she is not only his wife, but also a survivor of the Holocaust who has gone through the same suffering as him. Spiegelman writes, "It's good you got it outside your system. But for me it brought in my mind so much memories of Anja . . . Of course I'm thinking always about her anyway. Yes, you keep photos of her all around your desk - like a shrine" (1:104).

This overwhelming experience makes Vladek a caustic person and his relationship with his family members is bad, because everyone treats him without seeming concern, and no one can sympathize with his suffering in the Holocaust. His family members behave like the dead third. Vladek's second wife, Mala, always complains about Vladek because she does not want him to long for other women. In addition, Artie is impatient with his father because he did not experience the Holocaust and does not try to understand the pain his father suffered. In "When the Third is Dead: Memory, Mourning, and Witnessing in the Aftermath of the Holocaust," Samuel Gerson asserts that:

The "dead third" is conceptualized as the loss of a "live third" upon whom the individual had previously relied, had entrusted with faith, and in relation to whom or which, had developed a sense of personal continuity and meaning. In this regard, the third – again, whether person, relationship, or institution – serves the elemental function of solidifying an individual's sense of person, place, and purpose.

In the beginning of *Maus*, Vladek treats Artie very cold, telling him that there are no real friends in this world. Vladek is frightened during the Holocaust because his friends are killed and hanged over the course of an entire week. Due to this broken affection for his friends from the Holocaust, Vladek imposes his discomfort, distress, and grief onto Artie. In a kind of unconscious provocation, Artie just wants his father to talk about his memories of the Holocaust. Even when Vladek feels upset about a past event, Artie still insists that his father say more. Although Artie knows that the distance between he and his parents is unbridgeable, he addresses his absence from the Holocaust, tries to understand his family context, and attempts to find connections with his father and mother. Apparently, Artie, like the dead third, does not care about his father's feelings. Besides, Vladek is retraumatized by Artie's curiosity about the historical past. With regard to his mother, Artie can only experience her suffering in a doubly vicarious fashion – through his father's statements alone, since her diary has been

destroyed by her husband. He only gets a kind of one-sided version of Vladek's subjective feelings about Anja. Even if Vladek tells a lie, Artie would never know. This circumstance makes Artie very depressed because he has no means of knowing his mother's authentic thoughts about him, nor can he fill up his mother's absence. The psychological gap between Anja and Artie will be forever unfilled. In "Happy, Happy Ever After': The Transformation of Trauma between the Generations in Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*," Victoria A. Elmwood argues that:

Art, the character, becomes integrated into the Spiegelman family as esteemed chronicler, and also introduces elements of his own trauma – Anja's suicide – which establishes an indirect link between Art, the Holocaust, and its after-effects. From the fragments of the familial ties that remain, Art Spiegelman sutures together his own set of familial relationships, including the dead in the piecemeal family portrait that we glimpse throughout the two volumes of *Maus*. (694)

When Anja commits suicide because of losing Richieu, Artie thinks that his mother is a murderer because she demolishes his life. Moreover, from the point of view of Artie, Anja mourns the death of Richieu but ignores the existence of Artie. Instead of grief, Artie feels despair, anger, and numbness. When he depicts Artie's memories of his mother, Spiegelman purposely replaces animal images with human ones. This seems to suggest that Artie has vivid memories about losing his mother and he cannot banish this anguish. Additionally, the author describes Artie as being confined in jail because Artie may think that he (indirectly) kills his mother. Furthermore, when he draws Artie's personal memories, the author uses no page numbers, which implies that Artie's memory is discontinuous and fragmented. Artie is so traumatized by the suicide of Anja that he has to imagine typical schemes for the relationship between he and his dead mother. Indeed, Artie tries to construct a safe and secure room with his mother. According to psychological therapy, Anja should accept the death of Richieu in order to recover from her trauma. Apparently, she fails. Spiegelman writes, "Congratulations! . . . You've committed the perfect crime . . . You Murdered me, Mommy, and you left me here to take the rap!!!" (1:103).

These sentences make manifest that the dead mother, like an endless absence, always absorbs her child's vigor. Actually, Artie never does anything wrong, but he still must be punished in the aftermath of the Holocaust because he is a second-generation child of the Holocaust. Artie is helpless when it comes to his mother's grief for Richieu, and he cannot replace his brother in Anja's mind. Thus, he tries to procure some memories about his mother to mitigate his distracted feeling. Similarly, Vladek delineates many details about how he gets together with Anja before the Holocaust because he hopes that Artie can completely understand his suffering. Although Vladek directs his son to never write about this plot in his book, Artie never keeps his promise – he just hopes his book can be more real. Regardless of his father's feelings, Artie hurts Vladek again. Hostility and distrust always lurks in the

relationship between Artie and Vladek. Vladek says that when Artie was an infant, people called him “Heil Hitler.” Vladek seems to imply that Artie should never have been born. After considering the real feelings of other people, Artie feels guiltier about his survival. Further, Vladek also emphasizes how he and Anja love Richieu. Artie is almost ignored by his parents. In “Forced Confessions: The Case of Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*,” Emily Miller Budick argues that:

It also involves the attempt to counteract projective reprocessing of the past through which we deny certain of its features and act out our own desires for self-confirming or identity forming meaning. By contrast, working-through is bound up with the role of the problematic but significant distinctions, including that between accurate reconstructions of the past and committed exchange with it. (8)

Artie’s self-identity is deeply influenced by his parents. Although Artie is not an orphan, he receives insufficient love from his parents. The dead mother, like a ghost, always haunts Artie’s mind. After Vladek’s death, Artie’s book is successful, but he still feels guilty. The author never says, however, that Artie is sad about or sorry for the death of his father. This suggests that even if Vladek had already died, Artie, like the dead third, would never sympathize with the predicament of his father. Artie, Vladek, and Anja are always swamped in the sadness of self-intoxication and fail to empathize with the feelings of other people. Artie just wants his mother to be alive again. However, although Artie would like to record memories of the Holocaust to fill the gap caused by the absence of his mother, it is still useless. Useless but profitable – despite the fact that Artie never wants to write the book about the Holocaust to become rich. His book’s commercial success makes Artie’s guilt deeper and deeper. Here the author uses numerous images of corpses to portray Artie’s psychological condition. On the one hand, Artie wants to survive, but on the other, he wants to die. Artie’s loss of activity is due to the contradiction between his dual instincts for life and death. In “When the Third is Dead: Memory, Mourning, and Witnessing in the Aftermath of the Holocaust,” Samuel Gerson argues that:

The milk she fed her infant carried the toxic serum of the deadness festering in and about her, leaving the child saturated with the mother’s undigested loss and her blankness. Her emptiness becomes his, and his becomes the task to fill them both, to create presence in the space left by absence.

Gerson demonstrates that Anja’s sense of anger, regret, and anxiety makes her life miserable. As a mother, Anja thinks that she should protect Richieu, but she fails. Therefore, she feels guilty and helpless, always full of self-accusations. Even though Anja has Artie, a replacement child, her mourning still cannot be resolved. Anja’s pain over Richieu never ends. The only thing she wants is Richieu to return. Her mental trauma is subsequently transferred onto Artie, and now he must deal with

this problem. It is an impossible dilemma. Artie not only has to bear his own solitude, but also his mother's. Because this solitude partly exists in the dead mother, Artie's inability to grasp her absence makes him even more hopeless.

While seeing a psychiatrist, Artie talks about his feelings for his father. His feelings of guilt stem not from the death of his father, but from the fact that he cannot compete with his father, due to his absence from the Holocaust. Artie's mental situation makes it clear that he is the dead third for Vladek. When Mala leaves Vladek, for example, Artie refuses to allow his father to stay with him. Artie's only focus is filling up the absences of the Holocaust. Vladek, Artie, and Anja seem to share a psychological disease because the influence of the Holocaust is too powerful and immense to forget. Even at the end of the story, the relationship between Vladek and Artie is still alienated. Spiegelman writes, "More I don't need to tell you. We were both very happy, and lived happy, happy ever after. So . . . Let's stop, please, your tape recorder . . . I'm tired from talking, Richieu, and it's enough stories for now . . ." (2: 135).

Ironically, this story does not have a happy ending, but a tragic one. Vladek's hope withers away with the death of Anja. Vladek can only find consolation from the past, through memory. The author omits page numbers again to delineate the final plot. This seems to indicate that there is no way to mark the end of trauma. Moreover, Vladek calls Richieu, which means that he still wants Richieu to replace Artie. Artie stands helplessly in front of his father because his absence from the Holocaust never stops being acknowledged by his father. It is a tragic story, and the author never tells readers how to heal the trauma of the Holocaust. In *Maus*, the characters always get stuck in their narcissistic sadness and fail even to try to assuage other people's pain – only their own. This kind of response to suffering just allows incomprehension and misunderstanding to exist in their relationships. If they want to get out of misery, they should first try to comprehend other people's hardships. When we help other people, we can also feel happy. It is important that the relationship between the first-generation survivors and the second-generation children should not be filled with distrust and hostility. In *Maus*, feelings of unhappiness are passed down from generation to generation, but trauma is not a competition. Tragically, many people in this apathetic world cannot understand the pain of this particular trauma, but neither can the family of the survivors – nor can the very people who experienced it firsthand. Ultimately, the path to recovery from the trauma still has a long way to go.

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## Abstract:

For traumatized victims of the Holocaust, the most painful experience is a lack of sympathetic others. This apathetic world, like an absent presence, never feels guilty about the survivors of the Holocaust. Even survivors and their children cannot understand each other. This dramatizes the concept of the dead third. The notion of the dead third can also be extended to the notion of the dead mother, because these two concepts both represent a kind of continuing absence. In this paper, I use the dead third and the dead mother to explore the relationship among Artie, Vladek, and Anja in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*.

(對大屠殺的創傷受害者而言，最痛苦的經驗是缺乏同情心的他者。這個冷漠的世界像是缺席了一樣，對大屠殺的倖存者，從不感到罪惡。即使倖存者和他們的小孩之間也無法互相理解。這個概念稱為已死的第三者。這個概念也可延伸為死去的母親，因為這兩個概念都代表了持續的缺席。在此篇文章中，我用已死的第三者和死去的母親來探索 Artie, Vladek 和 Anja 之間的關係。)

**Keywords:** Holocaust, absence, dead third

(關鍵字: 大屠殺、缺席、已死的他者)