"We Were Rich Before"
War, Class, and Privilege in Maus & Perspolis
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Write an essay that compares and contrasts an element of two of the graphic novels read in class. This assignment was completed for Dr. Jayne Moneysmith’s Special Topics: Graphic Novels.

The “graphic novel” is often noted for being a medium that lends itself easily to the depiction of trauma. As scholar Hillary L. Chute observes, “The field of graphic narrative brings certain key constellations to the table: hybridity and autobiography, theorizing trauma in connection to the visual, textuality that takes the body seriously” (4). This unique combination of the visual image and the written word makes the trauma depicted more palpable to the reader, and these narratives, therefore, have the enormous potential to be much more visceral than, for example, the conventional novel. Many narratives, such as Alison Bechdel’s Fun Home, focus on the personal traumas of individuals, whereas others, such as Art Spiegelman’s Maus and Marjane Satrapi’s Persepolis, are positioned within trauma of entire communities. While these books both concern themselves on a structural level with individual people and their families, their settings during times of war allow them to take on a heightened significance. However, despite the fact—or perhaps because of it—that these narratives are concerned with individuals and communities in the midst of their respective wars and conflicts, the protagonists of both Maus and Persepolis live comfortably in the middle class, and this affords them significant privilege which, at least to some extent, often allows them to avoid many of the traumas of war.

Maus is a recounting of the experiences of Spiegelman’s father, Vladek, as a Jewish man in Poland in the years leading up to and during World War II. During these years, Vladek goes into hiding, is forced into the ghetto, and is eventually imprisoned in Auschwitz. However, although these experiences are unimaginable to contemporary Western readers, they could have been much worse. Early in the first volume of the narrative, it is made clear that Vladek and especially his wife Anja have a considerable
amount of capital. Soon after the two wed, Vladek’s father-in-law purchases Vladek a new textiles factory, saying, “You know, Vladek, when you and Anja give me a grandchild, I want him to be well-off” (Spiegelman 1: 21). Not only is this initial purchase massive, but soon after in the same volume, the uninsured factory is robbed, and Vladek’s father-in-law says, simply, “Well, at least I can help you build it up again” (1: 36).

The introduction of Marjane’s class and the associated privilege is more subtle, though that privilege itself might be more useful to her than Vladek’s is to him. For example, early in Persepolis, Marjane’s father, Ebi, is discussing with her the history of the current Iranian regime, injecting comparisons both with “Gandhi in India” and “Ataturk in Turkey” (Satrapi 19-21). This discussion shows that Marjane’s family has access to education, and this intellectual capital is directly connected to her family’s monetary capital. Soon after, Ebi reveals to Marjane that she is directly descended from the old emperor of Iran, who was her great-grandfather (22). Despite the fact that the family lost the bulk of its money previously, the residual class status that accompanied it seems to have been at least somewhat retained.

The class privilege of characters in both narratives is reinforced further by their access to certain services that might be viewed as luxuries. In Maus, Vladek is concerned by the amount of prescription drugs he finds in Anja’s closet (see fig. 1). It is later explained to him by a pharmacist friend that Anja has these drugs because she “was so skinny and nervous” (19). This is telling in that these pills were not prescribed to treat a medical illness, which would constitute its own level of privilege, but a psychological one, the treatment of

![Figure 1: Spiegelman, Maus I, p. 19.](image-url)
which connotes another level entirely. After Anja has her first baby, she is so overcome by her illness (“She’s always hysterical or depressed... A breakdown!”) that she has to move into a sanitarium (Spiegelman 1: 31-35).

Though no specific monetary value is assigned to this trip, it is difficult to imagine it not being significantly expensive.

While Anja and Vladek are away at the sanitarium, with the latter accompanying the former for support, a governess is hired to care for the infant Richieu in their absence (31). Later, the family is able to hire a maid in addition to the governess, which is indicative of their amassed wealth (37). In Persepolis, Marjane’s family also employs a maid, Mehri, (33), and one of the narrative’s most telling moments relates to her relationship with a man above her in class (fig. 2). This represents Marjane’s first exposure to struggles with class difference, although this particular struggle is not Marjane’s in particular. Her inability to understand her father’s unfair reaction to Mehri’s relationship can easily be read as a childlike naïveté, but it can also be interpreted as her own class privilege clouding her judgment. People in the lower classes have to be concerned about these things — Mehri, even though she was confident the relationship could last, still knew she had to lie and pretend she was Ebi’s daughter and not the family’s maid.
An obvious signifier of these characters’ privilege is their level of education. In *Maus I*, although Vladek received very little formal education, he is able to speak English, which he learned through private lessons (16), which, presumably, was not accessible to all in the community and provided him with a great deal of intellectual capital. Indeed, later in the narrative, this ability becomes very useful (fig. 3). The unique combination of Vladek’s ability to speak both English and Polish buys him a level of privilege within Auschwitz. For being able to help one of the Polish guards learn English, Vladek forms a connection with this guard, which allows him to access good food and good clothing that fits well (32-33). Vladek is even able to get a pair of shoes for a friend, Mandelbaum, whose feet are too big for the shoes that have been provided for him (29, 33-34). Later in that same volume, Vladek is able to quickly mend shoes for the guards, based on his experience “watching how they worked when [he]

was with [his] cousin in Miloch, there in the ghetto shoe store” (60). For this, he gains “a warm and private room from where to sit” (61). This skill may be seen as more practical than intellectual; however, this skill requires training, and it certainly allowed Vladek to possess a certain amount of privilege compared to his peers while still a prisoner in Auschwitz.

Figure 3: Spiegelman, *Maus II*, p. 31.
To contrast, in *Persepolis*, Marjane's educational privilege is a bit more conventional and apparent. While her schooling in Tehran was inconsistent, she grew up in an environment which provided her with a great deal of access to information. She grew up aware of complex academic theory, such as that by Marx and Descartes (12) and Lacan (181). She rejected some of these theories (181), but she was able to access them, and to understand her present position and that of others in Iran. The most obvious educational privilege – and the one most closely related to Marjane's class status, is her ability to leave Iran altogether to study in Vienna (147). Having the means to leave the country, and avoid much of the war while still in the country, is perhaps the biggest privilege afforded to Marjane and her family. Though this is possibly the largest and most apparent privilege afforded to Marjane, there are still many more ways she avoids trauma.

While still in Iran, Marjane hears of a man who was tortured and killed by the revolution (Satrapi 51). Much has been made of this section of the narrative and, in particular, the first panel on the following page (fig. 4). Chute describes Satrapi's choice to divide this man into "seven neat pieces" as being representative of "what Marji cannot yet realistically imagine" (151). Again, this is certainly evidence of her naïveté as a child, but it is also evidence that she was allowed to hold onto her childhood possibly much longer than many of her peers. In keeping with this, Marjane has her first experience with seeing death after a bombing in her neighborhood in which her friend dies. (Satrapi 142). This occurs a full forty pages after the scene in the narrative involving the "keys to paradise" (fig. 5). While these children are being blown up, Marjane and her friends are at a party (102). Satrapi's choice to juxtapose those two images is telling: She is intentionally exposing her own privilege through Marjane. Chute argues that "the author draws a scene of death not as a child perceives it empirically, but as she imagines it in a culture pervaded by fear of violence and retribution" (147). Although this fear pervaded her culture,
the ability to simply “imagine” this violence is, again, its own sort of privilege. Marjane remained removed from the bloodshed that was occurring very close to home.

Similarly, in *Maus*, as the Holocaust and by extension World War II begin to become a reality as Vladek is drafted into the Polish Reserves Army, Anja, Richieu, and their governess have at least what they believe to be the opportunity to avoid the worst of the situation by moving to Sosnowiec (fig. 6). This move was not, in fact, any safer than staying in Bielsko, where they had been living previously (37), and it took a great deal of capital to be able to move three people there. Obviously, this move is not on the scale of that seen in *Persepolis*, as Marjane, while in Austria, was completely out of danger of the war with Iraq and the Islamic Revolution – such a move likely would have proven to be impossible given the continent-wide reach of World War II – but Vladek still has options. He and his family were able to assess what information they had and act accordingly. The question of whether or not that actually saved their lives is never – nor could ever be – answered, but it very well could have, although Richieu did die in one of the ghettos.
However, there is one scene in each narrative where we see main characters doing just this. In *Maus*, this scene comes when Anja is (accurately) suspected of hiding secret papers related to “Communist messages” (fig. 7). Vladek’s father-in-law paid the seamstress’s legal fees as well as a personal compensation—a total of “15,000 zlotys,” which was “a lot”—around the same time he paid for Vladek’s factory (1: 29). While her family still used their significant privilege to correct the problem Anja had caused the seamstress, this still clearly shows her exerting her privilege over the latter woman.

A similar event occurs in *Persepolis*, when Marjane fears getting caught in public wearing forbidden lipstick. (fig. 8). In falsely accusing a man of sexually harassing her, she has doomed him to a fate which remains unclear (289). However, it does...
seem likely that Marjane’s punishment would have only been a fine that she could have easily paid (as has been done multiple times before in other situations [288]). Despite the fact that she could have paid this fine, she chooses to instead play with the well-being – possibly life – of an innocent man.

A pivotal scene near the end of *Persepolis* involves Marjane discussing how their financial privilege had been an asset travelling abroad, and how that changed following the Islamic revolution (fig. 9). She also briefly discusses how their class privilege intersects with racism as well as xeno- and Islamophobia (203). This is a very telling passage, in that it shows that at least some of the privilege possessed by Marjane and her family has been lost during the war, or is at times overshadowed by their other identities, such as those along racial and ethnic lines. Similarly, in *Maus*, the reader sees Vladek in a very lower-class situation following his release from Auschwitz; he is being assisted by the American military, but while getting this aid, he needs to perform certain tasks (fig. 10). Following war, these individuals and families have found themselves subjugated in ways they never had before – Marjane’s mother never felt as though she were hated when she went abroad, and Vladek never had to do menial chores for bars of chocolate. The experiences of war directly caused this subjugation, and the passage in *Persepolis* suggests that it
entirely broke Marjane’s mother’s spirit. Anja’s suicide, as it is discussed in *Maus* (1: 100-04), is evidence that she, too, was broken by the war itself and the lowered class status that followed.

Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* and Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* aptly illustrate, not only how appropriate the graphic novel as a medium is to depicting large-scale trauma like war, but also how those with class-based privilege during war experience it. Throughout both narratives, the reader can easily see many of the differing ways in which this privilege can manifest itself. This culminates in the protagonists’ abilities to circumvent at least a portion of said trauma, showing the importance of economic privilege in war.

![Image](Image)

*Figure 10: Spiegelman, Maus II, p. 112.*

**Works Cited**

