

Katherine Villinski
ENG 314: Final Paper
Professor Creadick
12 - 10 - 2024

My Door is Always Open: Entries and Exits of Multi-Temporal Trauma

THE PRINCESS BRIDE, CHAPTER 3: "THE SHRIEKING EELS"

THE GRANDFATHER

She doesn't get eaten by the eels at this time.

THE GRANDSON

(tightly clutching his bed sheets) What?

THE GRANDFATHER

The eel doesn't get her. I'm explaining it to you because you look nervous.

THE GRANDSON

I wasn't nervous (THE GRANDFATHER gives a skeptical look). Well, maybe I was a little bit... concerned. But that's not the same thing.

THE GRANDFATHER

Because we can stop now, if you want.

THE GRANDSON

No. You could read a little bit more...if you want.

Although not a requirement of the genre of memoir, emotional investigations of personal and historical trauma lies at the heart of many books falling under this category, for some a defining literary trait. This exploration may be done for and through the protagonist, or be a secondary but more central story facilitated by the memoirist. In order for readers to fully comprehend and receive these narratives, it is vital for authors to consider the strength and sustainability of their access points. If not employed correctly, or perhaps revisited repeatedly to the point of abstraction, the story's accessibility can be nullified, negating the entire purpose of

this genre: productive and intentional witnessing. Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Jesmyn Ward's *Men We Reaped* hit this sweet spot of these entry (and exit) points with consistent dedication and sensitivity, their careful storytelling recognizing where "past vulnerabilities were laid bare" (Warin & Dennis, 103) and deploying them for the purpose of individual and collective healing.

Within each chapter of Art Spiegelman's novel *Maus*, Art's character has conversations with his father, Vladek, about his experiences with the Holocaust, collecting research for his project, *Maus*. For the bulk of the chapters, Vladek's recollection of Holocaust scenes have literary bookends situated in the first (using this term loosely here) timeline (New York, 1978) effectively breaking up an overwhelming chronicle of suffering into smaller chunks. By this established division, there are two literary temporalities - the narrative present (1978 Art and Vladek conversations), and the narrative past (1930s Vladek's life during Holocaust times). In consideration of *Maus*'s meta nature, there's also real world temporalities to analyze, that is the actual occurrence of the book's events - Art's conversation with his father, and his father's past, totaling four separate temporalities. Chronologically, #1 is real-life Art's collection of his father's stories, #2 is real-life Vladek's recollection, #3 is book Art's collection of his father's stories, and #4 is book Vladek's recollection; to be completely accurate to the book:

1-2-1-2-1-2-1-2-1-2-1-2-1, and then 3-4-3-4-3-4-3-4-3-4-3-4-3. But let's not get ahead of ourselves.

The memoir's entry point is one that is constantly revisited and revised, perhaps serving as an exit from the very same location, becoming more of a revolving door. Through Art's inquiry and encouragement, the audience witnesses Vladek's storytelling, and with Art's

departure each chapter, the audience follows. The ability of the story's facilitator (Art) and their audience to easily enter and exit from a story of suffering and trauma may very well be intended to aid our low tolerances for pain and hardship. In the conclusionary cells of "Chapter Four: The Noose Tightens," Vladek finishes his storytelling, catching his breath on a stationary bike he had been pedaling all the while: "Well...It's enough for today, yes Artie?..." (Spiegelman 91), "Whoa... I overdid a little. I'm feeling dizzy" (Spiegelman 91). Vladek's own divulgence of his memories takes a mental toll on him, and here we see this psychological burden of storytelling manifested into physical exercise that leaves him without energy. This example of a narrative exit is visually illustrated as a return to the 'normal,' in which domestic life can resume with significantly lower levels of conflict and tension for Vladek, Art and the audience. Preceding Vladek's stopping point is a traumatic turning point in the sequence of Holocaust narratives: Vladek and the other Jewish residents of Sosnowiec, Poland are assembled for a series of formal document inspection and stamping, following a period of alarming and invasive home document checks. There's only so much we can witness at a time - delivering a consecutive chronicling of the Holocaust would only overwhelm us; the same can be said for equally traumatic memories of enslavement, rape, genocide - any and all forms of suffering. On the other side of the start-stop narrative movements of *Maus* are the equally domestic and familiar scenes, providing subtle context for family dynamics and grounding reader and author; most bookends consist of Art entering and exiting the house, exchanging (not always pleasant) pleasantries with his father and Mala, listening to their marital grievances and concerns for their stories.

As previously stated, the entry and exit points (or bookends) of *Maus* are easily detected with clear distinctions between the narrative present and narrative past: each chapter begins and

ends with at least one page of Art and Vladek sharing a scene in 1978, resuming the story. I believe the growing length (and/or intensity) of these doorways can correlate with the reader and writer's need to both ease into the story, and decompress following increasingly upsetting scenes; aligned with the progression of World War II, Vladek's memories escalate and Spiegelman must accommodate for the sake of his own peace of mind, and ours. In tracking the entrances and exits (pages dedicated to the narrative present) the following information can be collected: Chapter 1 - 2 page entrance and 1 page exit; Chapter 2 - 1 page entrance and 2 page exit; Chapter 3 - 3 page entrance and 3 page exit; Chapter 4 - 1 page entrance and 2 page exit; Chapter 5 - 4 page entrance and 2 page exit; and finally Chapter 6 - 6 page entrance and 2 page exit. These points of access do not include the brief interruptions mid-chapter from the narrative present, as these serve only as brief 'breathers,' and not a utilization of the fixed memoir door which builds both reader endurance and reader/writer intimacy.

Among the bookends length, other noteworthy details are what scenes are depicted, what is established, the evolution of the bookends across the six chapters, and how the scene informs the larger narrative. On the very first page of the novel (excluding the prologue), the audience is clued into the distance between Art and his father, his mother's suicide, Vladek's unsuccessful but unfortunately still intact remarriage; the cells go on to illustrate Vladek's apprehension over his life being made into a book, and Art's coaxing. The scene establishes important context related to the family's background history and how real-life Art approached his father and the process of writing *Maus*; it also establishes the differences in how Art and Vladek each view this process of storytelling - for Vladek it's unwanted and an uncomfortable action, for Art it's equally laborious (for different reasons - Vladek's emotional strength in recollecting Holocaust

memories, Art's emotional strength in cajoling his father's words out) and important for the public to remember. These much-needed domestic deviations from the trauma at hand demonstrate the "intimate connection of ordinary activities with the creative enfolding and refashioning of memory" (Warin & Dennis, 107); a fixed story of trauma aided by a secondary plot attunes the audience for greater witnessing.

Addressing the required historical and psychological distances of contemporary memoir, Freedman remarks, "Twentieth- and twenty-first-century American fiction writers, conversely, benefit from writing out of the modern and postmodern eras, literary periods that grant authors more freedom to write what—and how—they want, without being (as) socially censured. Postbellum authors also have the literary latitude to write into their narratives a variety of combined and contradictory styles and voices that—through intersections of form and content—open for readers Venn liminality and incite dual-witnessing" (Freedman 31). Not only are modern writers afforded the time and delay to formulate and comprehend personal events, but are given more literary flexibility and creative license to resurrect these narratives in a unique context. Another memoir buzzword that Freedman touches on here is liminality, that is the in-betweenness of memoir writing, and conversely, the dual witnessing; the author is what connects the source material with the audience, and as such, their role becomes liminal. Not only does Art's authorial presence represent his liminality, but is manifested in his literary character.

The structure of Jesmyn Ward's *Men We Reaped* is similarly dependent on the temporalities of loss and suffering, primarily the five men "reaped": Roger, Demond, C.J., Ronald, and Joshua, their deaths told in reverse order; Ward's own withholding of the details of

her brother's death may allude to both her desire to first build trust with her audience before divulging her greatest loss and even more importantly, to cushion the emotional blow and protect her readers, effectively evoking the writer/reader contract via the manipulated constraints of space and time. There are two main temporalities here - two timelines beginning at opposite ends and meeting in the middle at the book's end...and they're happening at the same time. Ward's individual timeline begins in her childhood and moves toward the present, and the second timeline occurs within a four year span, beginning with the most recent and last death (2004), and moves toward the oldest and first death (2000).

The relationship between author and subject is aided by distance and time and the ability to oscillate. An important quality of memoirs based in trauma is an oscillation in narrative focus, explicit or ambiguous in nature. *Maus* - incredibly explicit, literally moving from one side to the other, making for a more straightforward analysis based on distinct entrances and exits; on the other hand, *Men We Reaped?* Less explicit. "Rather than thinking about memoirs as being variants of *either* autobiography or biography—as if these were totally distinct—we may think of them as situated on a continuum from those focused on the author to those focused on an other. Texts found near the middle of this continuum may take as their subject neither the author nor some proximate other person but rather the relationship between them" (Couser 21). Her narrative core, similar to Spiegelman's, is a central conflict that transcends and exhausts individual narrative - traumas related to systemic racism and the Holocaust; these temporal movements along the memoir's continuum aid and impact the reader's witnessing. Narrative oscillation proves a necessary measure taken to prevent the reader from becoming overwhelmed

and disengaged - the duality of witnessing and the enactment of reception theory is mutual between writer and reader.

Similar to the distinction between *Maus*' narrative present and past as being visually split and kept separate, like water and oil practically, Jesmyn Ward's two moving temporalities are in equal parts distinct, as well as well-paced and woven together skillfully. For the sake of building intimacy and the sheer gravity of her trauma, Ward goes as far as issuing entire chapters to a single temporality (unlike Spiegelman's 'bookends'), the first tracking her own life towards the point of her brother's death, the second tracking the five deaths and moving backwards to her brother's death (see Figure 1). Yet where *Maus*' narrative oscillations feel more removed and allow the audience a brief exhale within a domestic space, Ward's two temporalities are similar in tone - mournful and defeated. This could be owed to the fact that each temporality is simply narrated by the same voice, but whether intentional or not, these subtle oscillations give us historical context (each timeline contextualizing the other, a relationship of mutual narratorial aid - the trauma informs the context, and vice versa) and an emotional cushion, to a lesser degree than *Maus*. For each 'reaped' chapter, the audience is provided with the days of birth and death, and the age at which Ward came into contact with them, situating us in each individual story. The degree of separation feels so clear at times that this novel could be two separate books, although the hybridity makes for a more informed collective narrative, staggering in intensity - both moving forward while swaying from side to side, as well as deeply astonishing and shocking.

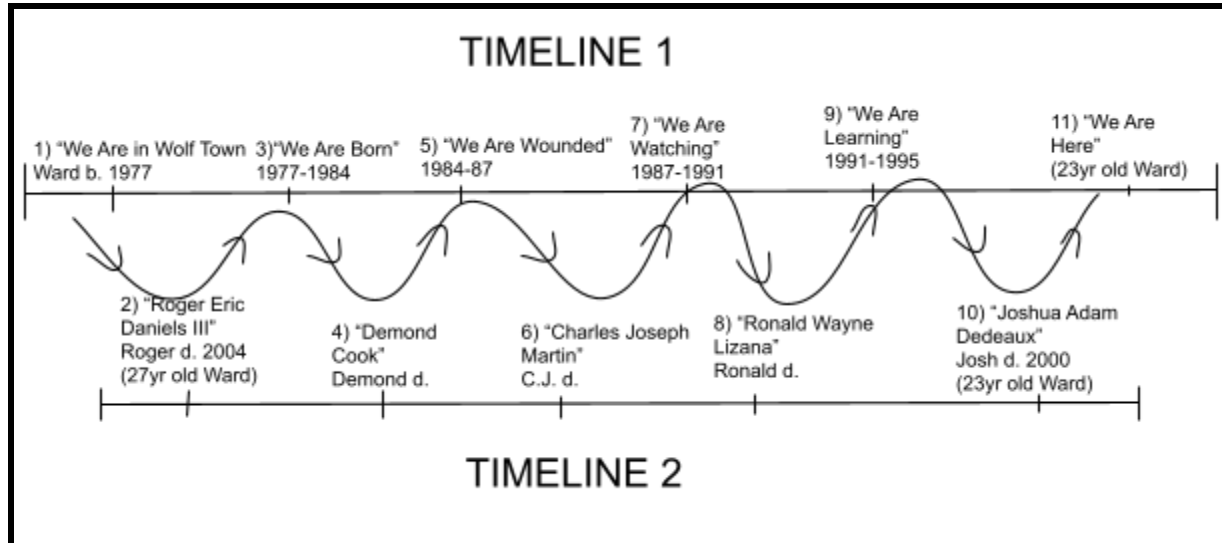


Figure 1. The two timelines/temporalities in Jesmyn Ward’s *Men We Reaped*, utilized in a back and forth sequence. Timepoints are numbered based on their chapter order or occurrence in the book. Moving left to right, the curved line represents the chronological sequence of the book, jumping between Timelines 1 and 2: Timeline 1 is Ward’s personal narrative, while Timeline 2 is the individual narratives of the “reaped” men, presented in reverse chronology (the most recent death first, the earliest death last).

I believe the utilization of multi-temporal memoir writing is meant to reconnect a culturally validated trauma dichotomy; yes, there is a natural division that results from the physical and emotional time and space that follows trauma, but through the memoirist’s multi-temporal recollections, the two pieces can be remarried. On the assumed division, Warin and Dennis remark, “collective narrative of persecution and trauma becomes somewhat divorced from the context of the lived experience of that persecution and trauma” (Warin & Dennis, 105). What maintains this convergence is effective narrative accessibility; though all experiences of an intense nature (horror movies, spicy wings, saunas, etc.) can be said to exist on a spectrum of individual tolerance, the author is responsible for healthy consumption. No we’re not talking about the wings; back to memoir! Trauma is not easily observed, so the memoirist is highly encouraged to make use of an understated and simple tool of the genre: doors. May you enter at your own risk, return safely, and have the courage to do it again.

Works Cited

- Couser, G. T. "What Memoir is, and What it is not." *Oxford University Press* (2011): 15-32.
- Freedman, E. W. "Confronting Race, Gender, and Violence in American Literature." *University Press of Mississippi* (2020).
- ScuffedShoes. "The Princess Bride - Grandpa and the Eels." YouTube, uploaded by ScuffedShoes, 23 February 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ej0U9KW5Wt4>.
- Spiegelman, Art. *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*. Pantheon Books New York (1992).
- Ward, Jesmyn. *Men We Reaped: A Memoir*. Bloomsbury Publishing (2013).
- Warin, Megan, and Simone Dennis. "Telling silences: unspeakable trauma and the unremarkable practices of everyday life." *The Sociological Review* (2008): 100-116.