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## THE CHILD AS THE FATHER OF THE ANGRY YOUNG MAN: AN ANALYSIS OF THE QUINTESSENTIAL ANTI-HERO

Dr. KAMNA SINGH

Faculty, Department of English, MCM DAV College, Chandigarh



Dr. KAMNA SINGH

### ABSTRACT

*Calvin and Hobbes* is a serialized comic strip by American author Bill Watterson, initially published from 1985-1995. From the perspective of literary and cultural studies, it is a valuable postmodern text in terms of both its form and content. It pokes fun at the postmodern condition and the seemingly high-brow nonsensical expression (or babble) associated with it. It is itself presented as postmodern nonsense/babble or pomobabble (a portmanteau word) with its roots in American suburbia and the value –systems associated with the ‘Land of Stars and Stripes’. This paper addresses the depiction of Calvin (and his alter-ego Hobbes) as the child who exhibits all the characteristics of the modern ‘angry young man’. The kaleidoscopically fragmented and conflicted personality of the protagonist as represented by Calvin (and additionally represented by the stuffed toy Hobbes who embodies Calvin’s alter ego) serves as a representation of the typically middle-class, intelligent, aware, lonely misunderstood and frustrated man who rages against everything under the sun without making sustained attempts to change anything. With one foot in predestination and lofty ideals as embodied by the protagonist Calvin; and the other in the ruthless reality of competition as embodied by his stuffed toy Hobbes- *Calvin and Hobbes* is a pastiche of what it means to be an angry young man in an increasingly artificial world.

*Calvin and Hobbes* has become a valuable mirror to and sculptor of popular postmodern literary culture. It combines literary techniques of text and stylistic elements of art to convey its messages and build a subtext of meanings. It is a vehicle for expressing the hopes and nightmares of our uneasy contemporary world. It illustrates the internal human struggles and playfulness of postmodern conditions. It embodies the pleasures of evasion and transgression, which momentarily frees its readers from their supposed identity and social orders, engendering playful practices. It takes a postmodernist position which does not believe in a grand narrative that can explain humanity universally and demonstrates free-floating

relationships between signifiers and signified. Human beings may be living in a puzzling world, but they are not about to give up on it. It must be remembered to not forget that while the readers may be no more real than Calvin, they are also no less. Human beings become their own masters when they let instinct and intelligence guide their activities and sense of life, for giving into the fear of losing our subjectivity is what blocks people from becoming something *other* than what they are.

The strip’s ‘star’ and its mouthpiece for contemporary American values and postmodern philosophies is Calvin, a six-year-old ironically christened after the prominent Sixteenth century French Reformation theologian John Calvin. While

the latter is famous for religious extremism, the former is infamous for his Pomobabble. The medieval Calvin believed it was his calling to take care of church discipline by ensuring God's word was followed as law. He tried to erase every trace of luxury and amusement from public life, believing them to be a violation of God's will. John Calvin believed that while some were predestined to have an eternal afterlife, others were fated to eternal condemnation. If we compare and contrast these ideas to those of his postmodern cartoon namesake we find much vital dissimilarity. The limited understanding of life shown by Watterson's Calvin seems to be poles apart to the historical Calvin's. However, both the fictional Calvin and the real one share an unshakeable faith in predestination and mankind's depravity.

The money and power the original Calvin despised is precisely what the child Calvin wants most of all. Young Calvin seems to be unknowingly influenced by Ayn Rand's Objectivist philosophy in his desire to make his own decisions free of any guidance, authoritative or otherwise. He yearns to be the law unto himself, and in the footsteps of humankind's many autocrats, the world around him. Since he perceives the world from his unique point of view, it usually doesn't occur to Calvin that the rules of the world outside his imagination apply to him, and he often ends up getting into all kinds of trouble. While Calvin is hyperactive and difficult to deal with, he tends to ponder over life's greater issues, such as human nature or the meaning of existence. This intellectual curiosity is done in a humorous but thought-provoking way, and adds to the appeal of the strip, because it prompts people to puzzle over questions that might not otherwise come to mind.

Calvin's interaction with human characters in the strip is awkward and distant at best and downright rebellious or even hostile at worst. In storylines chronicling Calvin's half-hearted attempts to join mainstream society, his status as the suspiciously-regarded 'outsider' becomes thoroughly ensconced. Notwithstanding the presence of Hobbes, the number of installments in which Calvin appears entirely by himself runs to an extraordinarily high percentage. Calvin's emotional

responses tilt to the extreme, triggered by circumstances revealing much about Calvin's contrary edge, for the readers tend to find him at his most sullen while caught in the grip of humanity's customary prescribed courses of activity, and most ecstatic on occasions he manages to extricate himself. Calvin appears to regard his status as a six-year-old American boy as one of the cruelest of jokes ever perpetrated, and fills nearly the entire history of the strip with a seldom-disguised rage against it. Calvin's incessant demand is that his true self be placed on the stage instead, no matter how unpalatable it may be to conventional society.

Calvin's social maladjustment stems from his psychological maladjustment, which in turn may be attributed to his postmodern environment and the parenting he receives. His parents are often shown re-evaluating the rash decision to have their son and invariably blame each other. In their defense it must be said that these discussions only occur right after Calvin has been especially problematic.

The postmodern Calvin hates the hegemony of authority in its many manifestations such as school and its attendant early-morning risings, irate teachers, homework, and fellow students. He often visualizes the school building as a hostile planet and in typical existentialist angst, finds no meaning in the 'facts' he is taught, rather than encouraged to learn, there. Moreover, school is too serious for him for here he is not given the opportunity to develop according to his imagination and at his own (relaxed) pace. As far as homework is concerned, Calvin has a selective memory which usually chooses to forget about this minor nuisance. In exceptional circumstances, homework is sloppily done and then too at the last possible minute (even in such rare cases he mostly gets Hobbes to ghost-write it for him.) His philosophy is: "Childhood is short, adulthood lasts the rest of your life" and so it is vital to take as much advantage of childhood as possible, instead of wasting time at school.

Childhood is the base for development as it forms the subconscious. Compared to other children his age Calvin is, in many areas, way ahead. He may even be a child prodigy, considering his extensive knowledge of postmodern works of art, literature and philosophy. In other ways however he is a

normal child, yet unable to clearly distinguish fantasy from reality and judge reality sensibly. He is very interested in supernatural creatures, and makes up fantasy friends which may be found with all sorts of children as a physical manifestation of fantasy combined with constant company. The fantasy friend has some of the child's own qualities, and making it do things the child itself does not dare to or cannot do is a safe and even desirable ventilator for pent-up thoughts. A feeling of inferiority can be reduced through a fantasy friend who possesses the qualities the child wishes to inculcate. These are exactly the kind of qualities attributed to Hobbes. The fact that Calvin often lies may be excused, considering that children his age often have problems with separating between what they want and what factually is. This sensitivity to of a child's natural development can partly be found with Calvin's parents. The understanding received by Calvin may also be part of the reason why he seems perpetually trapped in this period.

Calvin's best friend is Hobbes who exists in two dimensions: reality in which Hobbes is a normal stuffed tiger, without any functioning vital parts; and fantasy for when the two friends are alone he turns into a lethal man-eating tiger, which only Calvin knows how to control. It is paradoxical that even if Calvin thinks of Hobbes as a constant living creature, as he is shown to believe in the strips, he is simultaneously aware that he is the only one capable of seeing the tiger for who he is leave alone communicating with him. However, he never bothers to ponder over this 'fact of life'. Even if they are best friends, Hobbes constantly tries to and often manages to fool Calvin. However, in reality it has to be Calvin fooling himself. This leads us to the complexity of Calvin's character. On one side he frequently exceeds all grown-ups in the cartoon with his logic, knowledge of foreign words and diverse subjects such as art, literature, philosophy, polity, psychology, sociology and so forth. On the flip side Calvin, like other children, is afraid of the dark and night time. Of the two, Hobbes is the first to back out when Calvin's ideas are a threat to life and health. Calvin uses Hobbes to acknowledge his true feelings.

Bill Watterson's comic strip presents the mind of a boy through a lens of play. Calvin's primary form of play involves a best friend, a tiger, who may or may not be imaginary. With this friend Hobbes, Calvin enjoys frequent escapism from the toils and tortures of everyday society, and seems to be perpetually chasing the ephemeral apotheosis of some time away from time. The phrase, "time away from time" is appropriate, because Calvin and his may-or-may-not-be imaginary friend are both figments trapped in the frames of a comic panel, a square boundary between the fiction of the strip and the larger world of deadlines and ad space, a boundary that implies the lineation of temporal narrative. It is clear from examining different comics over the course of the strip's lifespan that Watterson was slowly making attempts to draw out of the rigid boundaries of his medium and represent visually the fluid imagination of his titular characters

The readers identify with Calvin, constantly feeling out of sync with the world, and retreating to the world created for the self in the mind. Calvin is really quite an anomaly not just in comics but in popular entertainment as a whole. He has no extracurricular activities; the only people he regularly sees are his parents, teacher, Susie, the bully Moe, his babysitter Rosalyn, and the occasional uncle, doctor etc. all of whom he detests and all of whom detest him. The only person he ever has any real interaction with exists only in his head. He is, for all intents and purposes, completely alone. And he's fine with that. The kind of person most people would entirely ignore is not usually the kind you make the star of your show, and yet the strip became hugely successful.

People of all ages enjoy *Calvin and Hobbes*, it means even more to those who grew up with him. Going to school every day and sensing the many ways one didn't fit in, it was comforting to see someone who was intelligent and independent, and didn't need to be a puppet of convention to enjoy life. Though numerous motivational programs and guidance counselors said it again and again, it was Calvin who managed to truly convince an entire generation of youngsters facing a troubled existence- without being preachy, without being sappy, perhaps even without trying- that it was okay

to be different. What makes it one of the great treasures of our culture is its ability to invoke emotions and thoughts that one never imagined one would spend on a comic strip.

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