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In the Footsteps of the Shakespearean Fool: The Critique of Hegemonies in 'Calvin and Hobbes'

Dr. KAMNA SINGH

Faculty, Department of English, MCM DAV College, Chandigarh



Dr. KAMNA SINGH

ABSTRACT

Calvin and Hobbes is a comic strip by American author Bill Watterson, initially serialized from 1985-1995. As a kaleidoscope of literary and cultural critique, it is a valuable text in terms of its wit, graphics and plotlines. It makes tongue-in-cheek allusions to the hegemonies proliferated by contemporary value systems and questions intellectual pretensions. It is presented in the tradition of the Shakespearean 'Fool' who also tends to veil profoundly insightful remarks behind a mask of humour. It criticizes the hegemony of ideologies in all possible aspects of contemporary culture. With its roots in American suburbia and the aspirations associated with the 'Land of Stars and Stripes', this text manages to bring its opinion on a wide variety of issues to the attention of the masses. It thereby encourages, through the lens of play, a thoughtful attitude in its readers and encourages them to be unafraid to make and express their own opinions in an increasingly indecipherable world.

Key words: Comic strip, Hegemonies, Cultural studies, American popular literature.

Popular culture is a mass discourse where knowledge, pleasure, and power intersect. A visual field is formed in and through the alternative discourse of comic strip culture, which educates and motivates its readers to go beyond mindless consumption, to actively participate in the culture-production process through creative and contrapuntal reading.

If there was ever a comic strip ripe for critical study, *Calvin and Hobbes* would be it, although such efforts have not been forthcoming. A comic strip, especially one that on its surface might be regarded as targeted more towards children than adults, would not readily be looked upon favorably by an academic community locked into more traditional avenues of inquiry. But more than anything, *Calvin and Hobbes* is diabolically challenging, dazzling its readers with such a wide-ranging montage of character, imagination and

atmosphere it can leave a scholar feeling uncertain about where to stand in relation to it.

The combined effects of characterization, drama and scene cape clearly demark this strip as more substantial than the average play-it-for-gags comic strip, and suggest a medium with a potential range of absurd to sublime that surpass that of the more self-conscious and worn-out forms of modern literature and art. Faced with a comic strip that can turn so frequently on the concept of perspective, the reader may find himself/herself at a loss as to how to take a perspective upon the strip itself.

In research and writing, the quality and frequency of thoughts determines one's livelihood. To accomplish a high standard of output, a kind of mental agility or playfulness needs to be cultivated. This is why this paper attempts a re-reading of the comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes*. Moreover, contemporary scholarship in the humanities

questions the narrow range of cultural objects that have fallen under serious interpretive scrutiny. This paper participates in that trend by considering an instance of the cartoon strip, a widely circulated and influential medium of popular culture that, highly charged and subtly coded, affects both adults and children. Combining the two great sign systems of image and text to create humor that is both graphic and linguistic, both self-referential and broadly critical in a social sense, the cartoon strip provides a locus for the analysis of sign systems and of subjectivity, a laboratory for the study of doubling, displacement, and disjunction; together with priority to psychological, particularly developmental, themes as well.

In this paper 'Stars and Stripes' refers to the 'All-American' nature of *Calvin and Hobbes*. There are also puns on the terms 'Stars' and 'Stripes' individually, as 'Stars' represents the faith in pre-destination held by John Calvin after whom the child protagonist of this comic strip is named. The cartoon Calvin not only professes faith in the ability of stars to control his destiny but also desires to be the centre of attention at home, in school and even the whole world as a super hero or super villain- in short he desires to be a renowned figure, or 'Star'. Symbolism is strong in comic strips and Calvin is often shown star-gazing with Hobbes. He also is shown desperately struggling against authority figures such as parents and educators to do as he pleases. In short, he wants to be guided only by his own will- he wants to be a pole star onto himself.

On the other hand, 'Stripes' refers to Hobbes' tiger stripes and the savage nature of postmodern society where only the smartest and fittest may survive. Calvin is neither too smart nor fit but Hobbes' benevolence towards him enables him to carry on with life in an otherwise inhospitable environment. Stripes also symbolize the illuminating rays of quiet wisdom Hobbes sheds in Calvin's world. Just as a tiger cannot change his stripes, Hobbes cannot change his beliefs, in particular his disdain of humankind. Nevertheless, he manages to provide a lonely child with the psychological, emotional and spiritual comfort where conventional social institutions fail to do so.

The biggest lesson is that of the dualism of the two main characters. Calvin and Hobbes are a bipolar model, a dialectic conception of reality that has a long literary tradition, like Quijote and Sancho Panza. If we look closer at our protagonists, they have much of Cervantes spirit: Calvin is idealistic, the spirit of imagination and liberty. Hobbes, is more intuitive, the ideal friend for Calvin, because, he knows when to criticize him, when to give advice, and when to let him go on with his plans. They form a unit that complements each other perfectly.

Postmodernism, whether seen as a critical concept or merely babble, undeniably has a formidable range. Similarly daunting is the range of the postmodern text *Calvin and Hobbes*. Therefore, to juxtapose static images with the postmodern dynamics of *Calvin and Hobbes* has been an audacious enterprise. But what this enterprise speaks to, among other things, is a process of historical mutation and de-sublimation, which involves a kind of social difference which does not mix well with the increasingly totalitarian marriage of rational technology with corporate agendas. The genius of Bill Watterson has given form to this pending collision via the figure of Calvin and his extreme imagination, which is presented as so intense and active as to conjure up the figure of Hobbes, as a stunningly sophisticated feline companion. Watterson has thereby been able to create parallel worlds that are richly textured and represent the postmodern fragmentation of the society and individual.

The world inhabited by Calvin looks, in its provision of one level of the strip's narrative, like the world inhabited by the readers. But there is also the private world of imagination which is rendered just as apparently real to those same millions of readers. Given the sheer vitality of Calvin and Hobbes themselves as characters, the brilliance of their repartee, the tight focus of the strip's format, and the levels of resonance in the story lines, it's even possible that their world inside the strip has become, in some ways, more intensely real for many readers than the routine world that they themselves encounter. Moreover, Watterson's admirable resolve to resist both commercial licensing of *Calvin*

and *Hobbes* products and the inevitable dilution of the strip's edginess through commercial animation, has meant that the strip's internal tautness is both maintained and increasingly layered.

When it comes to art and academic theory, Watterson lampoons both the commercial mainstream and those who are supposed to be "outside" it. Postmodern philosophy and texts lack a central hierarchy or organizing principle and embody extreme ambiguity, complexity, contradiction, diversity, interreferentiality and suchlike, in ways that are often indistinguishable from parodies of themselves. Watterson drew strips with increasingly absurd visual distortions: inverted colors, objects turning "neo-cubist," or other distortions. It is apparent that only Calvin is able to notice these changes, which seem to illustrate both his own shifting point of view and a typical six-year-old's wild imagination. Watterson uses the references toward modern art normally to reflect on it, not without a certain bit of irony, though, he tests it's limits, the public's capacity of comprehension and it's place in today's market. There are numerous strips which make fun of Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase": in summer, Calvin parodies the cubist artist's work with his own naked parade down the stairs after a bath while in winter and he also delights in making anatomically correct snowmen 'nakedly' descending snow stairs. It serves to reflect upon culture and art and their relation to society. It is not only about a textual cite, the strips dedicated to Calvin and the snowmen revolve around the topic of conception and value of art as a means of communication for the masses, and its transcendence, perdurability which does not stop from being ironic, realizing that the base of these reflections are snowmen that can last only a few days.

Calvin and Hobbes has become a modern popular classic. It has received almost unanimous favor by critics and by the public. References are not just for the sake of spoof or grabbing eyeballs in *Calvin and Hobbes*. They serve as homage to a series of texts and demonstrate the author's experience as a reader. They integrate themselves with the comic, achieving a specific function for the story. Almost always, the message behind the story is that the

individual's psychology and environment have been greatly influenced by postmodern ideology and value-systems. Postmodern thoughts and their expressions are parodied yet the reader is conveyed the idea that there is a method and profound philosophy concealed in 'pomobabble'. This 'pomobabble' may ultimately hold the key to humankind's adaptation to a rapidly changing world and the survival of the human individual, society and sanity.

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