

**WOMEN IN COMIC STRIPS: WHAT'S SO FUNNY?**

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**INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, comic strips have come to be regarded as a reflection of the normative structure. Unlike many other forms of popular art, however, comics tend to be written for a more heterogeneous audience and as such, deal with themes which are relevant to the general public and reflect prevailing customs and attitudes found in society though not necessarily in actual behavior. Comics offer a base from which to study and understand societal values and norms.

We will examine some major female characters portrayed in national syndicated newspaper comics since 1968 to identify the prevailing attitudes and values toward women. Although our primary focus is upon the past decade, the quick identification of characters in stereotypic roles do not change rapidly (Barcus, 1963; Berger, 1973). We find that comics perpetuate the attitudes and stereotypes of a time when traditional sex role behaviors were perhaps more closely observed. Similar to findings in children's books (Weitzman et al., 1972), comics portray men in dominant roles, and women are generally placed in passive and submissive roles. Berger (1973), found that the ratio of male dominance to female dominance in comics is nearly two-to-one, which is consistent with our data. There are many ways in which such traditional sex roles are portrayed, and the comics serve to perpetuate these stereotypes.

There is much more going on in the comic strip than is contained in the speaker's bubble. Facial expressions, other character's presence and their reaction, the use of exclamations, and the setting, have a great effect on the message being sent out to the reader. Comics are not difficult to read until we try to account for all these factors.

**DATA PRESENTATIONS**

The data are presented on the basis of three types of comic strips; each reflecting a certain perspective of female roles. The first type is that which portrays contemporary, adult life.

Included in this category were: *Blondie*, *Andy Capp*, *Fred Basset*, *Dennis the Menace*, *Family Circus*, *Brenda Star*, *Winnie Winkle*, *Steve Canyon*, *Rex Morgan*, *Judge Parker*, and *Doonesbury*. A second type portrays life in pre-modern societies and included: *B.C.*, *Wizard of Id*, and *Hagar the Horrible*. The third type consisted of strips which portray a children's view of the world. *Dennis the Menace*, *Family Circus*, and *Peanuts* were included here. These types can overlap, as in the case of *Dennis the Menace* and *Family Circus*, where both adults and children are major characters.

**CONTEMPORARY ADULT STRIPS**

In dealing with the humorous comics which reflect contemporary adult society, the domestic housewife is the traditional stereotype. In these comics, all the major female characters were married; three out of the five had children, (*Blondie*, *Family Circus*, *Dennis the Menace*); and only one female was employed, (*Andy Capp*). Although the strips do not realistically reflect married life, the reader can recognize and identify with the stereotypic behavior of these characters. The idealistic, traditional marriage arrangements these couples have may have a reassuring effect on the reader. What makes these marriages work is that each character is content to act in a stereotypical manner seemingly based on a role agreement between the couple. The wife stays home and takes care of the children and housework, while the husband works from 8 to 5 to support them. It's that simple in the strips, and it works — as long as the characters play their prescribed roles.

When one looks at some of the reasons this set-up is effective in maintaining relationships, certain attitudes about the traditional structure emerge. We see that women are very effective when it comes to decision-making within the home, child disciplining, and other household matters. At home, the husband is usually portrayed as a total incompetent. On the other hand, the male is to handle his job, the bank

books, and outside responsibilities; an area of expertise in which the female is inefficient.

*Blondie* is a good illustration. She is responsible for getting Dagwood to work each morning. She wakes him in time for work, makes his coffee, and rushes him to the bus stop. At home, Dagwood frequently naps in order to escape doing chores, but through Blondie's insistence, he seldom succeeds. However, when Blondie goes on one of her shopping binges, she is totally frivolous with money and can never make up her mind as to what she wants. She is the epitome of many stereotypes. She manipulates Dagwood to get what she wants. She never displays aggressive behavior and, if angered, releases it by crying.

The same principle of traditional and somewhat stereotypical role playing applies to the strip, *Andy Capp*. Here the reader sees what is believed to occur when the wife does not partake in the conventional stereotypical behavior. The conflict between Andy and Flo occurs when Flo assumes a domineering role and tries to quench Andy's "macho" behaviors. Although Flo works as a maid outside the home, her important job is providing the emotional and financial security her husband needs. Ironically, while Flo works to support herself and Andy, the landlord and tax collectors depend upon Andy for payment, suggesting that the husband is expected to be in control of monetary resources. And Flo, like Blondie, is capable of creating a strong sense of security in her environment.

*Dennis the Menace* and *Family Circle* illustrate traditional sex role behavior in a contemporary setting. Here, we often observe females in the roles of effective mothering and child disciplining. Dennis may exercise his authority among children in the neighborhood but he never succeeds in his attempts at home. He is placed in the corner by his mother, and although he is not happy about her decision, he never questions her authority to place him there. His father plays a minor role in disciplinary actions. Thelma, in *Family Circus*, is regularly seen instructing the children on etiquette and proper behavior. Her effectiveness in this role is suggested by her semi-angelic children.

Another popular stereotype, the woman gossip-monger, is frequently illustrated in *Fred Basset*. Typically, the wife goes to the store

and becomes so involved gossiping with her friend that she forgets her original reason for going out. In this strip, judgment is implied concerning the woman's actions. The hound represents an outsider who can objectively detect motives and behaviors of human beings. For this reason, we accept Fred's evaluation of the situation. Although he is often in position to suffer through his mistress' senseless gossip sessions, he isn't irritated, but views it as an inevitable womanly engagement. It seems that the woman is incapable of doing much more with her time outside the house.

The roles of a woman driver, gossip monger, and the hypochondriac are also popular, recurring themes in cartoons. Thus women appear to be weak, empty, and superficial and have nothing better to do, or are incapable of doing anything except act like "dumb broads." They can't drive or communicate well, and know little or nothing about politics, sports, or culture. One area that they are knowledgeable in, however, is spending money, but they are always frivolous with it.

In almost all of these cartoons there is a male present to serve as the judging principle. His expression generally suggests exasperation, frustration, disgust, or simple confusion and may be viewed as another indication of the males' need for superiority. Provided that the male can pronounce judgment upon the female's actions, he is still in control. Women are typically not seen in this position.

In most cases, males also appear qualified to judge or evaluate the female's actions outside the home. Within her environment, however, her abilities are seldom questioned. If she is content to play the feminine role, relationships are successful. Flo, in *Andy Capp* never succeeds in controlling Andy as long as she displays "masculine" behavior; he simply leaves the house. Success, in the comics, comes with adherence to the traditional roles in society.

The serious comic strips included in this discussion are *Brenda Star*, *Steve Canyon*, *Winnie Winkle*, *May Worth*, *Rex Morgn, M.D.*, and *Judge Parker*. These strips tend to be a more realistic reflection of society than humorous strips in that plot-situations are emphasized. Meaningful inferences about these characters can be drawn from the roles and actions they are seen to portray.

In serious comics where women are working in professional positions such as nurse and secretary, the dominant figures are male doctors and male bosses. *Brenda Star* and *Steve Canyon* do not cast women in traditional occupations, but even here they are dominated by males. Brenda, in *Brenda Star*, has a male boss, and Summer, in *Steve Canyon*, for all practical purposes, works with and for her male partner, Steve. The same pattern has been noted to exist in television programs in which females play major roles as heroines (Tavris & Offir, 1977).

One exception to this basic pattern was found in *Winnie Winkle*. Winnie manages a women's clothing design school and works with fashion models and designers — typically females. Winnie represents the modern, "liberated" woman. Her husband dropped out of sight years ago and she has never sought to remarry. She owns and manages a successful business and at the same time, cares for and supports her two children.

The adventurous or career woman seldom maintains such control within her environment. These women are caught in the rat-race and are tormented by a wide variety of problems. There is no emotional security here, for rather than being in control of her environment, the woman is struggling with a position in which she is powerless, and seems to serve no constructive function. In this world, males typically order her environment by being boss or lover. This is acutely a reflection of the traditional housewife who cannot function outside her home. These women usually are not married and typically have a very unstable home environment. For the most part, their work becomes their environment, but even within this area they are not very effective. To some degree, the stereotype remains the same as it was for the traditional housewife: business women cannot succeed outside the home.

These women never marry, even though they desperately try to do so. Rex, in *Rex Morgan, M.D.*, is always falling for another woman and ignoring June. Brenda's adventures lead into a close commitment with a male, but something inevitably goes wrong. In one scene, Brenda Star tells a friend: "Nothing in a real woman's life is good until the right man comes along ... Believe me, Pesky, I should know!!" (1-4-70). The message is clear that

women are never really happy or satisfied unless they are able to establish a romantic relationship with a man. Except in the characters of children, platonic relationships rarely exist in comic strips.

Still another area considered was the role in which elderly women are portrayed in comics. A traditional stereotyped role is the grandmother figure. This character seldom plays a major role, but she is often present. Characteristically, she loves children, bakes bread and sweets, and freely emanates warmth and love. These are apparently her only interests. This stereotype appears to be a significant reflection of our psychological needs as well as certain attitudes and practices to which our society adheres. 1) She never lives with the family; a reflection of our nuclear family structure. 2) She is always seen to be content and happy just to visit the family occasionally (as the Grandmother in *Family Circus*.). She is never resentful of the fact that she's unappreciated and that she plays a very minor role in society.

One strip in which an elderly woman plays a major role is *Mary Worth*. Mary represents the wise woman who shows a deep concern for our well-being, guides us through crisis, but never takes credit. She provides us with impeccable advice, but only when asked. Again, the stereotyped older woman as a positive, nurturing figure is reinforced. Another role in which elderly women are occasionally seen is that of the meddling woman. Here, the woman's intentions may often be good, but in her attempts to help people through crises she inadvertently creates more tragedy. An example of this character type is Melissa, in *Rex Morgan, M.D.* She is always trying to "mother" people through love and protection but is seldom successful.

One strip that can't be accurately classified as humorous or serious is *Doonesbury*. It moved into the national market in the latter part of 1970, and was found to be one of the most significant and realistic reflections of the new and changing roles of women in recent years. The women in *Doonesbury* are represented as having a more positive and healthy attitude toward sex and their own sexuality. In many instances, they take an assertive role. With the exception of *Doonesbury*, all of the comics discussed thus far place a heavy emphasis upon traditional female roles.

**PRE-MODERN SOCIETIES**

The second type of comic mentioned, portrays societies in pre-modern times, such as *B.C.*, *Wizard of Id*, and *Hagar the Horrible*. (Note *B.C.* and *Wizard of Id* are both written by Johnny Hart). While the traditional stereotyped female, as discussed, are present here as well, many major female characters are stereotyped in unique ways to fit the obvious limitation imposed by a historical time frame. Hagar's wife, in *Hagar the Horrible*, is the aggressive, overbearing woman. Although Hagar is brave and courageous on the battle fields, or capable of surviving bitter and harsh weather as he sails the seas, he is totally defenseless against his wife. In one scene, Hagar returns home after having been away months fighting battles. Without any proper welcome, his wife immediately demands to know where he's been. She sees something on his shoulder and picking it off, she cries: "It's a strand of spaghetti!! You've been to Italy again!" Shrinking back, Hagar meekly explains "I couldn't help it ... I got hungry" (9-26-76).

In *B.C.*, we find the same aggressive female who out-drinks the men at the rock-bar, and fights snakes with clubs. The aggressive, masculine female openly fails in the traditional feminine stereotyped role, which allows us to recognize and laugh at the image we assumed. Often there is an attractive female on the scene to present a dramatic contrast. For instance, one strip shows the two types of women walking by "Wiley's Bar", while the sex typed female is instructing the other on how to act around men. The fat, aggressive female's attempts at femininity are hideously recognized when one of the boys at the bar jokes at her about arm wrestling for the beers, and she turns to the other and asks: "What's the ladylike way to punch a guy in the guts?" (3-7-77).

In the *Wizard of Id*, the wife does not fit the image of a traditional feminine stereotype, as she is overweight, unattractive, bossy, and generally a nuisance. She is seldom treated as anything more.

The women portrayed have major roles and make a general statement about the unrealistic image of a stereotypical female. But the reader does not feel threatened when vices are accentuated since the strips are not situated in a real society. They serve to enter-

tain the reader with their nontraditional roles but one is always reminded, and perhaps reassured, that the traditional roles still exist.

**A CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE**

The third type of comic consists of those strips which represent a child's society. However, their world is not as childish as we initially suspect. Dolly, in *Family Circus*, is the only girl who is portrayed solely in the stereotypical role. She plays with dolls, jumps rope, and performs most of the roles we expect from little girls in our society.

*Peanuts* adheres to a different set of standards. The children generally imitate adults and an adult society. There are no adults in the strip and the children have created their own order by assuming adult roles. The main female character in the strip is Lucy. For all practical purposes, Lucy serves as the focus of authority by her domineering and authoritarian nature. She is seen as controlling the business world, represented by her psychiatrist booth. Yet, similar to the overbearing woman, she can also be exasperating and unreasonable.

Margaret, in *Dennis the Menace*, is similar to Lucy. She serves as the intellectual authority in her circle of friends, but she behaves in a traditional role. She bakes cookies, and gags at frogs. Dennis and his friends are often seen to "use" Margaret and play petty games with her. In 1972, Gina was introduced to the strip. Gina does not fit the traditional female role, nor does she assume any extreme masculine behaviors. Instead, this character is seen as being more androgenous in nature than many other women in the comics. Thus, Gina reflects the changing female role in society in addition to presenting an interesting contrast to the traditional roles. The comic strips are potentially harmful to the development of a well rounded attitude in children (and adults) toward male/female relationships. The basis of this appeal does not stem from the belief that women behave in the exaggerated and zany patterns as seen in the strips or even that they view themselves in stereotypical roles. Rather, the latent attitudes and images the reader has about women may be influenced through the stereotypes presented by female characters and through other strip character's response toward the female character's roles. To pass

(Concluded on p 117)

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these strips off as mere innocuous fantasy is to deny the very real impact of literature.

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