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Funny Pages: Comic Strips and the American Family, 1930-1960

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FUNNY PAGES

COMIC STRIPS AND THE AMERICAN FAMILY, 1930-1960

BY

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SUBMITTED TO PITZER COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
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Introduction

"The comic strip has become the prime chronicler of the common people, mirroring contemporary events and social customs. At the beginning of the 20th century, the life of an immigrant was depicted and the balloons contained dialect; then, women went to work and there were boarding houses, orphans, hillbillies and boxers; and then came the rise of the automobile and the airplane...all significant movements of the past century could be seen in the comics."—Mort Walker¹

Comic strips may be the only artistic medium that requires both daily novelty and confinement to, more or less, the same environment. Beetle Bailey has been avoiding responsibility at the same military base since 1950. Mary Worth has been giving unsolicited advice to anyone who will (or won't) listen since 1938. A *Golden Girls* episode from 1990 quipped in flawless comedic timing that the same *Apartment 3G* storyline still carries on decades later and that it is "later that same day."² This kind of sardonic commentary on the transitory nature of comic strips is entertaining and warranted, but sometimes it isn't so funny. Al Capp famously said, "My work is being destroyed almost as soon as it is printed. One day it is being read; the next day someone's wrapping fish in it."³ All the same, despite Capp's grim assessment on the everyday fate of comic strips (and despite the fact that they don't hold quite the cultural weight that they used to), people indeed were reading comic strips, every single day. By 1957, 4 out of 5 Americans in towns of over 2500 people reported regularly reading the

¹ Moira Davison Reynolds, *Comic Strip Artists in American Newspapers, 1945-1980* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2003), 5-6.

² *The Golden Girls*, "Zborn Again," episode 135, NBC, first broadcast November 3, 1990, written by Mitchell Hurwitz.

³ James M. Spickard, "Writer Channels Spirit of Al Capp," Press of Atlantic City, last modified December 12, 2013, accessed April 14, 2014, http://www.pressofatlanticcity.com/opinion/letters/writer-channels-spirit-of-al-capp/article_c7529555-a8fa-58f6-a0ac-93152dc926e4.html.

comics pages of the newspaper.⁴ Impermanent as they were (and are), comic strips inarguably had an impact on Americans. What exactly was so pervasive about comic strips in American culture, and what messages they were sending to readers are questions that beg further analysis.

This thesis examines a selection of newspaper comic strips from approximately 1930 to 1960. Specifically, this work will address how three domestic comic strips communicated ideas of personal success in tandem with certain family or moral values. For the purposes of this thesis, “domestic” means simply relating to the home or the family—ones that are not Adventure strips (*Terry and the Pirates*, for example), or Soap Operas (*Rex Morgan, M.D.*), or those involving unsupervised children (*Peanuts*, *Nancy*, etc.). Three strips in particular are the focal point for this thesis: *Blondie*, created by Chic Young in 1930, *Little Orphan Annie* created by Harold Gray in 1924, and *Li'l Abner* created by Al Capp in 1934. The first chapter, focusing on the relationship between Blondie and Dagwood Bumstead, will discuss how power within the family hierarchy is predicated on moral character, as well as how the recurring theme of punishment develops through Dagwood's personal failures. The second chapter will look at the idea of cultural regularity in *Little Orphan Annie* through an examination of Daddy Warbucks. It will also deal with themes of leadership and legacy as communicated by the relationship between Annie and Warbucks. The third and final chapter will discuss how the satirical strip *Li'l Abner* responded to *Blondie* and *Little Orphan Annie* in terms of its rejection of traditional family hierarchy, specifically relating to male-female relationships. This chapter will also discuss particular moments where *Li'l Abner* seems

⁴ David Manning White and Robert H. Abel, eds., *The Funnies: An American Idiom* (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1963), 16.

to address directly and purposefully specific themes present in either *Blondie* or *Little Orphan Annie*. The organization of the three chapters will present *Blondie* and *Little Orphan Annie* as opposite ends of the same moral spectrum—as dealing with the same behaviors and values that lead to punishment and reward, respectively—and *Li'l Abner* as the strip that addresses the previous two's definitions of success and failure in the domestic sphere, and in many ways redefines their criteria for proper behavior.

All three strips use the spatial and temporal limitations of the comic strip format in their own ways. *Blondie* stayed (and stays) more or less with the “gag-a-day” approach, with recurring jokes and themes, but never any long-term storylines. *Little Orphan Annie* had many daily gags and occasionally made attempts at continuity, sometimes having storylines extend for a week or two each—but they often repeated themselves in form and content with only a few details changed. *Li'l Abner* was probably the most adventurous of the three in terms of time and space, with its use of devices such as a strip-within-a-strip (which was itself a parody of Chester Gould's *Dick Tracy*) as well as the use of a suspense format to tell a love story over two decades. All three strips fell somewhere on the spectrum between ignoring time as an object altogether and using time to protract a story.

The way that these strips told their stories is important, obviously. But to be clear, this work is less an analysis of the narrative arcs (long or short) and more an analysis of the way that the characters are sketched through their narratives. In other words, the discussion does not necessarily focus on what happens in each strip, but on what the events that take place say about the principal characters—character development is a priority over narrative development. It is just as important to look at

how comic strip artists used the unique format to give their characters dimension and transform them from broad or stock figures into real, grounded fixtures of American culture. It is no accident that Dagwood Bumstead now has a sandwich named after him, or that the character of Annie is repurposed again and again as a cultural warrior for a generation, or that nearly every hillbilly trope in existence has roots in Dogpatch where Abner Yoakum lived.

In addition, this thesis operates on the principle that, as a part of mass culture, comics are inherently ideological. They are always political, even when they are not explicitly so (and most syndicates in the 1930s would have preferred that they weren't). In a 1939 essay on Charles Dickens, George Orwell asserted that "all art is propaganda."⁵ Adapting his ideas to comics, the question remains: how does the humor of comics not become stifled by their messages? And more specifically, how do these messages get embedded in a medium that is allegedly rooted in entertainment? Orwell decides that a sense of familiarity with readers is critically important. The fictional world that they experience needs to feel comfortable so that they may suspend their judgment, accept the undertones of the art, and allow the messages to register. This is especially true of a medium that reaches millions of people every day. And he is not the only writer who levels criticism at mass culture. Members of the Frankfurt School (Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, et. al) tended to believe that mass media played a large role in forming social consciousness and establishing the status quo, preventing a

⁵ Christopher Murray, "Propaganda: The Pleasures of Persuasion in Captain America," in *Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods*, ed. Matthew J. Smith and Randy Duncan (New York: Routledge, 2012), 129.

vehicle for social change.⁶ Of course, they did not mention comics specifically as the problem (and neither did Orwell for that matter), but the presence of comic strips in American culture at midcentury should raise questions about what in particular readers were going back to every day, and why.

From the early days of modern comics and print cartoons, they were extremely popular. For the purpose of clarity, this refers to the period beginning in the year 1897 with the launch of Rudolph Dirks's *Katzenjammer Kids* [Figure 1], both the oldest and longest running comic strip in history.⁷ Early comic artists such as Rube Goldberg [Figure 2], John McCutcheon [Figure 3], and Charles Kahles [Figure 4] made fine livings from their work due to the demand for newspaper comics and single-panel cartoons. However, for the first three decades of this period, it was a fairly widespread understanding that the comics pages of the newspaper were there for children, to round out the publication and to make an appeal to the entire family. In 1931, George Gallup conducted an analysis of newspaper readership in Iowa. The results shocked Gallup—and William Randolph Hearst, who had ordered the study in the first place. It turned out that not only were the comics popular with adults too, but they were, by a large margin, more popular than the leading news stories. The margin of popularity was even wider in the Sunday editions of the paper, where the comics expanded beyond the basic 3- or 4-panel structure and were usually in color. Gallup expanded his research, and his findings also asserted that not only were newspaper readers loyal to such an accessible form of art as the comics, but that this was true more or less across the

⁶ Thomas Andrae, "Adorno on Film and Mass Culture: The Culture Industry Reconsidered," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 20 (1979): 34.

⁷ Jerry Robinson, *The Comics: An Illustrated History of Comic Strip Art* (Toronto: Longman Canada Limited, 1974), 25.

board, regardless of class, occupation, or the urban/rural divide.⁸ To put a finer point on it, one thing was true about Depression-era America: people of all kinds were more interested in reading the funnies than finding out about what else was going on in the world. Later surveys led to more insight about why people were reading comics: a majority of people who admitted to reading the funnies every day also reported varying levels of anxiety, dissatisfaction and general emptiness in their lives. Since people preferred comics over actual current events, we might be able to deduce that comic strips presented them with the lives they wanted, with the lives they thought they should have.⁹ In order to get a better sense of what exactly readers were gathering about the world around them, this thesis will take a closer look at the number one (*Blondie*) and number three (*Little Orphan Annie*) comic strips in America for the time period under examination. In addition, it will also take a critical look at the satirical comic strip that most explicitly challenged the most popular comic strips in the nation, *Li'l Abner*.

Blondie, created by Chic Young, debuted on September 8, 1930 for King Features Syndicate (the largest comics distributor in history, owned by the Hearst Corporation).¹⁰ At the time of *Blondie*'s debut, Young was a recognizable name in the industry for his previous work on *Beautiful Bab* and *Dumb Dora* [Figure 5], both strips that starred gorgeous, young—but ditzy—flapper-esque girls. *Blondie* was the latest,

⁸ Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 110.

⁹ Arthur Asa Berger, *The Comic-stripped American: What Dick Tracy, Blondie, Daddy Warbucks and Charlie Brown Tell Us about Ourselves* (New York: Walker, 1973), 90.

¹⁰ Ian Gordon, *Comic Strips and Consumer Culture, 1890-1945* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998), 107.

but easily most popular, strip to use that trope.¹¹ The strip was almost an instant success, and Blondie Boopadoop's 1933 marriage to seemingly-wealthy industrialist Dagwood Bumstead made national news.¹² The early years of the strip followed the young couple after Bumstead's blue-blooded parents disinherited him due to their disapproval of Blondie. The strip continued to gain in popularity after the introduction of Blondie and Dagwood's two children, Alexander and Cookie who are, unsurprisingly, spitting images of Dagwood and Blondie, respectively. *Blondie's* popularity was so widespread that the strip was eventually adapted into a series of 28 films between 1938 and 1950, a radio show that ran from 1939 to 1950, two different television sitcoms beginning in the 1957 season, and two animated cartoon specials airing in 1987 and 1989.¹³ *Blondie* continues to run to this day, with Chic Young's son Dean in creative control, and it reaches an estimated 250 million readers in 47 countries.¹⁴

This thesis, however critical of the strip, does not seek rewrite *Blondie's* place in the history of American graphic humor. There was a reason it was so popular, especially as it relates to the strip's representation of marriage and family. A common answer is to remark that Blondie and Dagwood were the every-couple. In 1947, comics historian Coulton Waugh made the argument that young men and women in the years following the second World War, consciously or unconsciously, modeled themselves after the Bumsteads, saying:

When the boys came home and married, there were millions more Blondies and Dagwoods to experiment with the fascinations and

¹¹ Reynolds, *Comic Strip Artists in American*, 76.

¹² Donald D. Markstein, "Blondie," Don Markstein's Toonopedia, accessed April 14, 2014, <http://www.toonopedia.com/blondie.htm>

¹³ Markstein, "Blondie," Don Markstein's Toonopedia

¹⁴ Markstein, "Blondie," Don Markstein's Toonopedia

frustrations of life in a cottage built for two or more. These are days when the young husband is apt to roll up his sleeves and help with the dishes, which is exactly what Dagwood would do, or at least what Blondie would expect him to do. This pair reflected the lives of a large group of people at the present time, which is proved by the fact that when newsprint paper was made available after the war, and new comics came into existence, it was *Blondie* which most of the newcomers tried to imitate.¹⁵

Whether young couples reading *Blondie* realized, or even cared, that their prototype for a successful marriage was set of fictional characters is not entirely relevant. What does matter, however, is that a closer look at the *Blondie* dailies from this period actually gives quite a grim portrait of marriage. Chapter one will attempt to illustrate how all of the humor in the strip is predicated on Dagwood's numerous failures as a husband and provider for his family, and how many of the glimpses into their marriage reveal the characters to be living out a punishment for their poor choices: Blondie for her youth spent as a self-sexualized gold-digger, and Dagwood for marrying beneath his class.

Chapter two will explore *Little Orphan Annie*, created by Harold Gray in 1924. Gray began his career in the early 1910s; prior to enlisting in the First World War, he apprenticed for famous political cartoonist John McCutcheon. After the war he went on to do the lettering for Sidney Smith's strip, *The Gumps*, which was distributed by the Chicago Tribune Syndicate (the same syndicate that in less than a decade would go on to launch the hit *Dick Tracy*).¹⁶ The arch-conservative Joseph Medill Patterson, publisher and editor of the Chicago Tribune, would have extensive influence and control over the content of *Little Orphan Annie*.¹⁷ The strip followed the adventures of perpetually 8-year-old Annie and her mega-wealthy adoptive father, Oliver "Daddy"

¹⁵ Coulton Waugh, *The Comics* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1947), 105.

¹⁶ Reynolds, *Comic Strip Artists*, 50.

¹⁷ Robinson, *The Comics: An Illustrated History*, 89.

Warbucks. Gray would become known as the first comic strip artist to inject politics into his work. All comic strips are political in some way, but Gray was the first to break the unwritten rule about comics and make his explicitly political. Despite the overt political interjections of the strip, *Little Orphan Annie*, like *Blondie*, was more or less an immediate success. In October of 1925, just a year and some months after the strip's debut, the *Tribune* failed to run that day's *Annie* (for reasons unknown) and the public outrage was so enormous that the paper had to run a front page apology and run two strips on one of the days following.¹⁸ In the mid-1960s, when Harold Gray was dying of cancer, he expressed plans for the strip to end after his death, but the strip was so popular that the syndicate would not let him.¹⁹ The character of Annie would go on to be a huge crossover success, becoming a radio star in 1930, a film star via RKO studios in 1932, and a comic book character in 1938. The character's most successful incarnation, however, was in the Broadway musical *Annie* in 1977, which had a run of over 2000 performances in six years.²⁰

The chapter focusing on *Little Orphan Annie* will assert that the strip is something of a moral opposite to *Blondie*. That is, *Annie* is a strip not of punishment, but of reward. Ultimately, the concept of "cultural regularity" (a term originally coined by Margaret Mead) drives the moral spectrum of the strip. Within *Annie*, good work must be rewarded and a positive life is the sign of virtue.²¹ The strip values self-reliance and hard work, and ultimately it is about how to carry in-home learned morals out into the

¹⁸ Reynolds, *Comic Strip Artists*, 50.

¹⁹ Ibid., 51.

²⁰ Donald D. Markstein, "Little Orphan Annie," Don Markstein's Toonopedia, accessed April 14, 2014, <http://www.toonopedia.com/annie.htm>.

²¹ Marshall McLuhan, "The Mechanical Bride: The Folklore of Industrial Man," in *Arguing Comics: Literary Masters on a Popular Medium*, ed. Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 102.

world. The second half of the chapter will also discuss the way Annie is positioned to be a Daddy Warbucks for the next generation, reinforcing the conservative ideology that the good, strong values of the older generation will die with them unless they have children to carry them forward. Annie is obviously the star of the strip, but is constantly surrounded by adults and most of her dialogue is a clear regurgitation of the ideas taught to her by her father. Conversely, Daddy Warbucks is frequently absent from the strip in a physical sense, but his ideas and values consistently underscore the actions of Annie and his other associates. Ultimately, the strip is about the benefits of a life well-lived and the reward of Daddy Warbucks's legacy in the form of young Annie.

Chapter three will look at the *Li'l Abner* as a satire and as a response, in certain respects, to *Blondie* and *Little Orphan Annie*. True to creator Al Capp's volatile public persona, *Li'l Abner* was the immediate result of a great deal of tumult and comic strip artist in-fighting. In the early 1930s, Al Capp was ghost-drawing for acclaimed artist Ham Fisher on his extremely popular boxer strip, *Joe Palooka*. A long-lasting feud between the two over who had actually created and developed a character named Big Leviticus, the first hillbilly to ever appear in a comic strip, caused Al Capp to part ways with *Joe Palooka*, Fisher, and McNaught Syndicate.²² Capp began drafting a comic strip that he would dedicate completely to hillbilly characters; King Features unsurprisingly refused to publish it without major changes. Most of their strips (including *Blondie*) centered on northern, middle class suburban experiences, and Capp was interested in giving Americans a more sympathetic view of the American South. So, he sold it to

²² Reynolds, *Comic Strip Artists*, 109.

United Features for much less money in exchange for total creative freedom on the strip.²³

Everything about the strip, from Capp's drawing style (he was insistent on drawing characters sharply and grotesquely), to the jargon used by the characters, to the outrageous storylines made it an instant success. The star of the strip was the ironically named 19-year-old Li'l Abner Yokum, who, at 6'3", had a strong and demanding presence. Abner was dense and uncomplicated, but had a heart of gold. Capp wrote him to be a purposeful optimist, someone who would rebel against a cynical world. In addition, Abner spent the better part of two decades evading the affections of Daisy Mae Scraggs, whose family was the Yokum's sworn enemy. Eventually, Capp conceded to readers' wishes and married Abner and Daisy Mae in 1952. *Li'l Abner* was a cultural phenomenon, best demonstrated in its invention of Sadie Hawkins Day, a day in which girls had the opportunity to ask young men out on dates. The pseudo-holiday first appeared in the strip in November of 1937, and within two years, over 200 colleges across the country were participating in Sadie Hawkins Day celebrations including foot races (as the strip had done) and dances.²⁴

The implications of *Li'l Abner* in the comic strip landscape go far beyond the pop cultural institutions it introduced; its job was to respond to and critique its contemporaries, and, to a certain degree, the sort of life that those other strips projected. *Li'l Abner* was not just commenting on lifestyles within comic strips, but on family narratives as a whole. *Blondie* and *Little Orphan Annie* normalized a certain kind of person and lifestyle, and *Li'l Abner* was there to humanize characters (and real

²³ Reynolds, *Comic Strip Artists*, 109.

²⁴ "On Sadie Hawkins Day Girls Chase Boys in 201 Colleges," *Life*, December 11, 1939, 32.

people) that would have seemed crude and uncouth. Al Capp challenged the social comfort zone that strips like *Blondie* contributed to and reflected. The relationship between Daisy Mae and Abner acts as a clever foil to that between Blondie and Dagwood. This chapter will look at the specifics of this dynamic between the two strips, including the idea that Daisy's command of the narrative in *Li'l Abner* empowers her in a way that *Blondie* does not allow its title character. Elsewhere, the chapter will explore the way the strip challenges the definitions of success as set forth in both *Blondie* and *Little Orphan Annie* and how it relates to Abner's rejection of material ambitions and heroic status. Ultimately, Abner's satisfaction with a humble life and the fact that the strip's universe does not punish him for it challenges the middle class aspirations set forth in *Blondie*. Neither he nor Dagwood is wealthy, but only one of them is unhappy about it. Finally, this chapter will look at how Al Capp's satirical approach in his comic strip serves to highlight the values expressed in the subjects of the first two chapters.

Though Chic Young, Harold Gray and Al Capp all spoke fairly candidly about their strips, there is a small but important note to be made about the role of the artist in this thesis, particularly in the case of Capp. He spoke extensively about what his intentions were in creating *Li'l Abner*, likely because it was such a groundbreaking strip and novelties tend to generate more press. However, though he infused his public persona into his work, his reputation as a troubled and belligerent man indicates that readers should tread carefully when deferring to the words of the artist himself. After all, how do readers (or fans) reconcile a man who, for example, was a famous womanizer but who also resigned from the National Cartoonist Society after they refused to admit a

woman?²⁵ Or a man who claimed to attack prejudice in all forms, but viciously parodied student demonstrators in the 1960s in the form of a group named S.W.I.N.E (Students Wildly Indignant about Nearly Everything)?²⁶ With that in mind, this thesis, while taking into account the backgrounds and stated opinions of the artists, seeks to allow their strips to speak for themselves. Though all the artists had their own ideas about how they envisioned their strips, and though those ideas are fairly well-documented, it is important not to rely excessively on them.

This thesis seeks to engage with a variety of sources and authorities on comic strips. Most are scholars writing sometime during the run of any of the three strips, and many are writing during the period specified for analysis here (1930-1960). For example, Coulton Waugh's book *The Comics* is the first major analysis of the medium and was published in 1947—roughly the height of popularity for all three strips.²⁷ As an early work on comics, it still relies on the aspect of their popularity more than would be ideal. The sections on *Blondie*, for example, do not make an attempt to work past the humor of Dagwood's characterization, and much of the first chapter will focus on deconstructing the way Dagwood's cycle of punishment consistently plays for laughter. Though much of the discussion will work to deconstruct the pop cultural significance of these strips, it is important to remember that, due to the issue of volume that comes part and parcel with comic art, strips are rarely archived in any useful or accessible way. Even some of the most comprehensive collections have some pieces missing (and

²⁵ Steven Heller, "Just How Bitter, Petty, and Tragic Was Comic-Strip Genius Al Capp?," *The Atlantic*, last modified February 28, 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/02/just-how-bitter-petty-and-tragic-was-comic-strip-genius-al-capp/273595/>

²⁶ Reynolds, *Comic Strip Artists*, 109.

²⁷ White and Abel, *The Funnies*, 10.

there is no record that any of these strips ever went on hiatus during this period; they would have been too popular). Often, access to public domain reprinted dailies means finding them in commemorative retrospectives, or compilations of highlights.

Therefore, many of the dailies presented here are what editors, historians, or in some cases the artists themselves consider the best, or most memorable, dailies. These sources offer insight into which stories were most popular with readers, and what aspects of certain characters contribute to the long-term legacy.

All of the chapters will mobilize criticism of the three strips in both broad and specific terms. They will use both larger, more comprehensive social histories of comic strips, such as Jerry Robinson's *The Comics: An Illustrated History of Comic Strip Art* (1974), and more specific looks at individual strips, such as Arthur Asa Berger's *Li'l Abner: A Study in American Satire* (1970) or *The Comic-Stripped American* (1972). Berger's books and a number of essays written throughout the 1960s and 70s are some of the first critical work regarding comics and do more to illuminate the political or ideological underpinnings of each strip. Berger is the only author used here who addressed all three strips in a critical manner, so his analyses will be more central to the goals of this thesis than others.

This thesis will also employ various theoretical works on the medium as a whole, most of which are more contemporary pieces (published after the year 2000). The first two chapters will also draw connections to literary and narrative analysis for the period, primarily through the work of Elizabeth Long and her book entitled *The American Dream and the Popular Novel* (1984), as well as selected writings by linguistic anthropologist Elinor Ochs. These two sources provide theoretical frameworks for the

tropes that appear in the strips, as well as thematic links to other media contemporary to this period. Occasionally, chapter one will also make use of commemorative retrospectives on the strip, such as Dean Young and Rick Marschall's *Blondie and Dagwood's America* (1981). The purpose of using such an obviously celebratory source for a critical analysis of *Blondie* is to problematize qualities of the strip that they think fans have taken for granted. Finally, in order to remark about a strip's longevity or pop cultural significance, this thesis will make sparing use of current commentary in the form of a satirical blog called *Comics Curmudgeon*, published daily by writer and comics expert Josh Fruhlinger. The pattern among this variety of secondary sources seems to suggest that the criticism becomes more astute (and less favorable, generally speaking) the greater the distance that exists between the original publishing of the strips and the commentary about them.

Ultimately, this thesis seeks to illustrate how a selection of comic strips expressed certain moral values, and the way in which they placed the characters at the mercy of following those values. For *Blondie*, failure results in the punishment of a lifestyle of mediocrity. The message from *Little Orphan Annie* (at least for the years that Harold Gray was in charge of the strip) is that not only is good work rewarded, but in many ways Annie is the reward for Daddy Warbucks's good work. *Li'l Abner* responds to these moral spectra by reinventing them almost completely.

Chapter One

Blondie: Marriage, Power, and Punishment

"I think the thing that makes for Blondie's appeal is that the strip is based on simple, everyday family life—sleeping, eating, raising a family and getting the money to do it."
—Chic Young²⁸

By the second half of the 1940s, *Blondie* was the number one comic strip in America, at its peak distributed to about 2000 newspapers.²⁹ It is admittedly difficult to assess the magnitude of that fact now, mostly because Americans currently live beyond an era where the number one comic strip in America actually says anything about its readers. So much as finding the numbers for the top strip of 2013 requires more than the cursory internet search, and it ultimately matters little that it was *Garfield* and not *Classic Peanuts*.³⁰ But in 1947, it mattered that *Blondie* had claimed the top spot. It matters to how readers, particularly young men and women, saw themselves. It matters that Chic Young prided the strip on conveying universal emotions and conflicts. And it certainly matters that several papers called Blondie's marriage to Dagwood Bumstead in 1933 the most important marriage of the year.³¹ After a while, readers honestly seemed to consider the characters as real people, and the marital misadventures of Blondie and Dagwood were consistently entertaining to them. It is almost ironic, then, how much the early dailies of *Blondie* seemed to paint the two as the worst-matched couple in history. If Blondie were sincerely just marrying Dagwood for his money, as the

²⁸ Chic Young, Dean Young, and Richard Marschall, *Blondie and Dagwood's America* (New York, N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1981), 16.

²⁹ Donald D. Markstein, "Blondie," Don Markstein's Toonopedia, accessed April 14, 2014, <http://www.toonopedia.com/blondie.htm>

³⁰ "The 10 Greatest Syndicated Comic Strips in American History," Listverse, last modified July 3, 2013, accessed April 14, 2014, <http://listverse.com/2013/07/03/the-10-greatest-syndicated-comic-strips-in-american-history/>

³¹ Waugh, *The Comics*, 100.

strip suggested in its early days, there was just one problem: Dagwood's parents would disinherit him in the wake of his marriage [Figure 6], due to their disapproval of her. Dagwood's choice to marry beneath him forces the couple, and the children they would eventually have, out of the moneyed class and into an average, middle class lifestyle. The issue of class is complicated in this strip; Dagwood's lack of a huge fortune suddenly makes him just like everyone else, but it also produces a context for resentment between the couple. And the strip does not particularly address that conflict and it doesn't issue any sort of closure. In addition, Chic Young may not have been taking some sort of elitist stance that one mustn't marry beneath their breeding; instead he might have been making a point that flappers are not women to marry. Blondie becomes a docile and sensible stay-at-home wife and mother, while Dagwood takes a humble position as an office manager at a construction company. This chapter, using academic commentary on the strip and a selection of dailies, will explore and investigate the consequences of their union, the way the strip constructs a façade in the form of an ostensibly normal life for the two, and the way the strip communicates that their life is not in fact a portrait of humble domesticity, but instead of a purgatory that comes as the end result of poor choices.

The title character, originally written as a flighty flapper named Blondie Boopadoop, ultimately became America's sweetheart in print form. But at first, Blondie was like a cross between Shirley Temple and Betty Boop: childlike, but incredibly intriguing with her feminine magnetism. She had a big heart and a sensual spunk to match. Blondie, in her first iteration, was very much of the 1920s. Everything about her was extravagant; her looks and personality were nothing short of a fantasy. But when

she was first introduced in 1930, it was a new decade and the nation was already in a different place than it had been just two years before. Something to note about *Blondie* is that comic strips about young and pretty girls were fairly common throughout the 1920s, and one needn't have looked much further than creator Chic Young's previous work: *The Affairs of Jane* and the bluntly titled, *Dumb Dora*. But in the first three years of the strip's run, *Blondie* was in danger of falling out of circulation completely.³² Simply put, the barebones premise of the early dailies was not interesting enough. That, and those in charge at King Features suspected that the everyday readers of the 1930s, ordinary people struggling with the Great Depression, would not relate to a story starring an enormously wealthy railroad tycoon and his flapper girlfriend.³³

But after their marriage in 1933, Blondie and Dagwood settled into domestic life fairly seamlessly. Even in the wake of losing his family's fortune, Dagwood seemed to align himself to a simple life quite well. His and Blondie's existence was ordinary; it was middle class and highly unremarkable. But that does not mean that their circumstances had unremarkable implications. One of the underlying themes that Young seemed to think resonated with *Blondie* readers was the Bumstead's necessity to work for success. And over the next decade or so, the strip gradually rose to #1. It is no accident that *Blondie* was the nation's favorite at the end of the war. Historian Elizabeth Long in her findings on tropes in best-selling novels in the post-war era offers:

Perhaps because of idealization—or distortion—of the complexities of postwar life...success is celebrated in its most pure and fabulous form....These stories...provide an exotic shell in which one can see the operation of contemporary values in exaggerated form. For example, the

³² Reynolds, *Comic Strip Artists*, 76.

³³ Berger, *The Comic-Stripped American*, 105.

importance of the quest for success, as adventure or agent of character formation, is obvious.³⁴

To be clear, applying Long's ideas to *Blondie* is not meant to imply that the environment of the strip could ever be considered exotic (it is quite the opposite, actually). But *Blondie* in this period did give its readers an exaggerated look at the simple aspects of success that Dagwood was so intent on obtaining—the ability to eat, sleep, and spend money on his own terms becomes a crucial objective in these decades of the strip. Long later points to two examples of best-selling historical novels: *Captain from Castille* (Samuel Shellabarger, 1945) and *The Black Rose* (Thomas Costain, 1945) that she argues “tell the story of young men of good blood who must make their way in the world because their families have fallen foul of the backward-looking institutions on the time.”³⁵ The genre and the setting of *Blondie* might be different than those two novels, but the story is strikingly similar—enough that Dagwood's plight to turn his misfortune over to success would have been recognizable and comfortable to readers.

Several other reasons have been offered as to why *Blondie* was the nation's favorite comic strip. And many of them, in one way or another, allude to the kind of marriage that Blondie and Dagwood represented. Some scholars have noted that when the young men who fought in World War II returned home to get married and start families, Dagwood and Blondie served as a model couple for post-war life, and that young men looked for themselves in the strip's dailies. The reading that Blondie and Dagwood made for the perfect couple, and that their children, Alexander and Cookie rounded out the perfect family, is not uncommon. But it is over-simplistic. Even if today

³⁴ Elizabeth Long, *The American Dream and the Popular Novel* (Boston: Rutledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 64-65.

³⁵ Long, *The American Dream*, 65.

the strip is considered old-fashioned and out of touch with the daily lives of most readers (despite its attempts at topical humor like smartphones and the Sochi Olympics, Figure 7), and even if readers have established a comfortable distance between themselves and the domestic trifles that still seem of a mid-century moment, *Blondie* deserves a critical examination as to why exactly it was once America's favorite comic strip. This involves a look at who Blondie and Dagwood represented, and what their marriage represented. It turns out that precisely what readers celebrated about *Blondie* is what is actually so troubling about it: it is a strip about punishment. They ostensibly had the perfect marriage, but in reality their marriage was an output of poor choices. Young could have written these characters as simple, average, middle class people who entered a marriage, and the desire for class mobility never had to be a part of their backstory at all. Instead he teases Blondie and Dagwood (and readers) with a glamorous and exciting lifestyle only to take it away from them. Both Blondie and Dagwood get pieces of their personalities taken away from them as a result of their union. Was Young simply saying that marriage is ultimately about self-compromise, or is he making a larger statement that it is better to want than to have? Young seems to make a point that ideals of luxury should be abandoned in favor of a drive for hard-earned success, however modest. Most remember the couple as a portrait of domesticity (which is its own problem), but they forget that in the early days of the strip, Blondie was a highly sexualized character with a penchant for older men (famously saying she had a habit of falling for her boyfriends' fathers), and Dagwood was set to become a second-generation railroad king.³⁶ He was supposed to be rich and

³⁶ Berger, *The Comic-stripped American*, 106.

successful. But it wouldn't have been because he worked for it; his success would be given to him by default. Through the act of marriage, Blondie loses a key piece of her womanhood, and Dagwood loses the power and authority that came with his family's money.

Faced with the idea that Blondie and Dagwood were the model husband and wife of the 1940s, but that they were also incomplete people in a handful of ways, readers end up with a picture that is actually quite grim. Maybe they were not entirely sympathetic characters in their original conceptions, but they weren't their entire selves after their wedding either. The strip suggests that the type of union Blondie and Dagwood—the kind where one is clearly communicated to be marrying beneath him—entered into can only result in a lifelong forced compromise of self. For Blondie and Dagwood, that they spend the duration of the strip's run reliving the same ordinary, mediocre, domestic banalities is the price they pay for not making good, moral choices in their youth. Blondie was not a righteous woman and in fact was mostly concerned with sex before she married Dagwood; her husband, on the other hand, reveals he has no ambition or work ethic. It makes the admiration of Blondie and Dagwood for their normality, their every-couple quality, all the more incongruous when readers realize that they are living out what is essentially a life sentence of mediocrity.

The Bumsteads: The Worst Best Couple in History

More than just acknowledging the painstakingly normal existence that Blondie and Dagwood embody, the humor of the strip often derives from the sheer mismatch of the two. In real life the idea of two people who do not belong together sticking a

marriage out would be pitiable; instead, in *Blondie*, their circumstances are amusing. Perhaps accidentally, Rick Marschall (an author who unfortunately seems charmed by the obvious sexism of *Blondie* instead of choosing to problematize it) concedes that the apparent disconnect between Blondie and Dagwood is played for laughs. He writes:

When Blondie began, the heroine was a gold-digger, a flighty dumb blonde chasing the hero, a millionaire's son, scion of the Bumstead Locomotive Works. It was a great device: she's assertive but purposeless; he's practical but weak-willed; the parents are opposed to the courtship, but begrudgingly tolerant. All the elements were there for the faux pas, the incongruity...³⁷

Indeed, Blondie and Dagwood often seem at work toward opposing objectives. Neither will ever win, nor lose, though, because a definitive result might shake their dynamic too much. Instead, most of the storylines for the dailies have Blondie and Dagwood stalemating each other. A daily from 1938 [Figure 8], for example, shows Blondie waking her sleeping husband in the middle of the night because she hears a possible burglar. He dismisses her claim by saying that burglars do not make noise (they take off their shoes) and goes back to sleep. The punch line in the fourth panel is that Blondie can then hear the burglar taking off his shoes, and the already clownish-looking Dagwood opens his eyes wide in fear. Here, Marschall's note about the paradoxes within the characters is exemplified. The "assertive but purposeless" Blondie initiates the gag within this daily, but is powerless in resolving it. Likewise, the "practical but weak-willed" Dagwood can mutter rather aimlessly about the mindset of a burglar, but is unable to actually do anything about one; he excuses himself from the action and tries to drift back to sleep. In reality, nothing has really happened in these four panels. His laziness and her powerlessness have rendered them unable to achieve any semblance

³⁷ Young, Young, and Marschall, *Blondie and Dagwood's America*, 20.

of conflict resolution. And this trope of their circular dynamic appears again and again, but with different domestic struggles as backdrops. So, though it is important to look at Blondie and Dagwood as a unit, as a couple, and what they might have represented to American readers, it is just as important to examine them as individuals and assess what they are each contributing to the conditions of the strip.

Dagwood: Indifference, Inadequacy, Irrelevance

As the head of the household, and the presumed provider for the family, Dagwood should have found tremendous motivation for personal success in his disinheritance. Instead, he's mostly a failure. Though he still technically holds the purse strings in the Bumstead family, he rejects hard and honest work. But Dagwood's inadequacy and irrelevance are a direct result of his lack of motivation, resourcefulness, and tenacity. As an act of punishment, his status as respectable male, as a powerful patriarch modeled after his own father, is revoked as Blondie becomes the anchor of the family. However, Blondie, does not gain any power from her husband's shortcomings; instead, literally drawn like a clown, Dagwood becomes the object of ridicule in the strip for his failure to properly control and provide for his family. And his failure and incompetence are quite telling of certain aspects of the post-war American male psyche. Dagwood gives widespread fears of inadequacy a personality and ultimately his domestic misadventures become a caricatured manifestation of those fears.

At this point, readers in a post-war context should have been asking: why, if he is obviously portrayed as a walking punch line, is Dagwood considered one half of the model couple in 1947? If he really is not capable of doing much right, why is there

considerable evidence that young men growing up and getting ready to marry in the 1940s looked up to Dagwood? It turns out that he's not exactly a role model (because he can't be), but instead he is living proof that men can be less than perfect and still have an, at least superficially, successful marriage. Dagwood makes mediocrity acceptable; he absolves male readers of any guilt they might incur from being anything less than enormously successful. Cartoonist and pioneer comics historian Coulton Waugh muses:

Dagwood is young, which makes the whole marriage more romantic. He may be dumb, but he's a 'good skate.' The fact that he isn't too strong or clever makes us feel better about ourselves. If a Blondie goes for Dagwood, just think what we rate. If he were Tarzan, we'd be left out.³⁸

The above statement is really getting at two aspects of Dagwood: his physical appearance and his boring personality. Dagwood is not strong or particularly attractive, but perhaps in the process he creates a new, more reasonable standard for masculine physicality. His lack of physical appeal amounts to more than just a matter of taste; he and Blondie have decidedly different artistic renderings. Unpacking what his physical appearance might have meant to male readers, requires a look at the glaring resemblance that Dagwood shares with a clown. With big, flatly expressive eyes, distorted bone structure, and wild hair, readers then and now would be remiss to ignore the comparison. Drawn that way, he might be, physically speaking, the exact opposite of the "Tarzan" type that male readers were apparently so afraid of. His average appearance is an outright rejection of the heroes of action and adventure strips such as *Joe Palooka* and *Buck Rogers*, and in turn a rejection of the masculine ideals of those strips. It might be difficult to live up to the demands of someone who stopped the

³⁸ Waugh, *The Comics*, 104.

world from ending, but it was much easier to emulate someone who avoided hard work like the plague.

But there is a problem with the reading that Dagwood's appearance is hopeful. It is fairly noticeable that Dagwood did not always look like a clown. In the early days of the strip, when he still had money, he was a perfectly fine-looking young man—or at least, he still looked like a real person. Only after he marries Blondie and gets disinherited does his appearance undergo this quite drastic change. In *Comic-Stripped American*, Arthur Asa Berger observes:

His face, with those two dots for eyes and the hair standing out in two tufts, as if they were horns and he were cuckolded, is ludicrous, and even more so since Blondie is relatively realistically drawn....Now with the cuckold hairdo, he represents an ancient tradition in comedy: the man whose wife has been unfaithful to him but is unaware of it. This humor is based on exposure and ignorance: we know something Dagwood doesn't.³⁹

Western art and literature have a long history of depicting cuckolded men with horns, with early examples for literature including Arnolphe from Moliere's *L'Ecole des Femmes*; 19th century French graphic prints [Figure 9] also make use of this trope.⁴⁰ To be sure, the idea that Dagwood's clownish appearance and horned hair means he is being cuckolded is nothing short of peculiar, mostly because that would have been too racy and unseemly for the strip. It is unlikely that Dagwood's artistic rendering is literally suggesting infidelity in the strip. There would have been something enormously cruel about a daily where Blondie cheated on Dagwood—it would have completely destroyed the illusion that she was the perfect wife and mother. It is more reasonable, however, that a suggestion of Dagwood's sexual inadequacies can be

³⁹ Berger, *The Comic-stripped American*, 104.

⁴⁰ <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/courses/nvaget/311sp10/ecoledesfemmes.html>.

viewed simply as an aspect of his general inadequacies. Dagwood's clownish appearance does not seem to suggest that because he is unattractive, his wife is obviously having an affair so much as it seems to suggest that his punishment for making the poor choice of marrying beneath him is to look the fool. In the end, it matters little that Blondie would never actually deceive him that way—looking the part is embarrassment enough.

As for the shortcomings of Dagwood's personality, it is remarkably unambiguous that he is in charge of the family by default, and not because he knows at all how to behave in a position of power (or even how to get there for that matter). He is weak, and the strip capitalizes on his weaknesses for the sake of humor. Even the Youngs conceded that Dagwood had only three main motivations in the strip: eating, sleeping, and making money.⁴¹ People who celebrate the strip for its simplicity and everyman quality use these motivations to make a statement that Dagwood was a humble man with humble desires. But by the way the strip makes every critique and joke at Dagwood's expense, one could almost call those three desires by different names: gluttony, sloth, and greed.

On Gluttony

One of the longest and most well-known running gags in *Blondie* is Dagwood's pursuit of the perfect sandwich. Through his eating habits, Dagwood becomes fixated on food at the expense of other responsibilities. The strip makes it clear that Dagwood

⁴¹ Berger, *The Comic-Stripped American*, 104.

likes to eat, but he remains mostly incapable of preparing his own food. Even making his famous sandwich proves difficult for him in most instances. Berger goes on:

“The kind of sandwich he made famous, the Dagwood sandwich, is a hodgepodge of leftovers in the refrigerator all wedged between two slices of bread. Food seems to be his only real source of gratification, which suggests that he is a case of arrested development.”⁴²

First of all, that the Dagwood Sandwich is just another name for a sandwich with every imaginable ingredient in it is incredibly telling. A daily from 1954 [Figure 10] shows him scouring the kitchen for ingredients that complement ham, only to forget the ham at all. Through small details like the third panel, Dagwood reveals his inability to moderate like an adult; he is incapable of self-control, of delayed gratification. What’s more is that overindulging in food frequently seems to end poorly for Dagwood; his gluttony is just the source of more difficulty for him. A daily from 1941 [Figure 11] shows him barely able to carry plate upon plate of food out to the living room, and when he finally eats he injures his tooth on a sardine can (which, due to his absentmindedness, ended up in his sandwich). *Blondie* strips were not always so explicit and direct in doling out its punishment for Dagwood’s incompetence and underdeveloped character, but here he literally experiences painful consequences for attempting to overeat.

On Sloth

It would be reasonable to assume that Dagwood Bumstead never expected to have to put in a hard day’s work. It is also reasonable to note that lazy domestic scenes

⁴² Berger, *The Comic-Stripped American*, 104.

in other strips that were similar to *Blondie* were meant to contrast their long productive day at work. Readers would have understood these men to be enjoying hard-earned relaxation. Gerhart Saenger observes in a 1955 essay on relationships between men and women in comic strips that:

More important, however, is the desire of the married man to be left alone, to relax and to take it easy, caricatured particularly in the comedy. This need is thwarted by the wife, who usually, successfully, tried to get her husband to help around the house after his return from the office.⁴³

Blondie complicates this trope by making the transaction between work and play highly unbalanced. In other words, Dagwood doesn't work to earn his relaxation, and it puts a rather grim spin on Blondie's comedic interruptions of his sleep. In a Sunday strip from 1950 [Figure 12], shortly after making a boastful comment about how he gets more sleep than his boss, Dagwood has to play host to Mr. Dithers and his inebriated associates, only to send them home (sometime after sunrise) to sleep all day while Dagwood has to get up to go to work. Blondie, having to play the role of the shrew, proceeds to verbalize droopy-eyed Dagwood's pain by saying, "No use you getting into bed, dear...It's time for you to get dressed and go to work." His defiant laziness gets him in trouble again, and this time both he and Blondie have to pay the price.

On Greed

Money, and the problems that come with it, is obviously a huge driving force in the strip, even though the Bumsteads' socioeconomic situation is rarely explicitly addressed. It was not uncommon for comic strips running around the same time as

⁴³ Gerhart Saenger, "Male and Female Relations in the American Comic Strip," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (Summer 1955): 202.

Blondie to contain an element of aspiration where it came to socioeconomic class.

Saenger goes on to say:

The pure comedy deals most often with the seeking of leisure, apparently a major inducement to amusement in our work-oriented culture. The seeking of leisure is more typical for the male of the species as he appears in the domestic scene or the comedy.⁴⁴

Throughout the strip's run, where it comes to Dagwood's desire for more money, we mostly see him asking for a raise from his boss, Mr. Dithers, or concocting some sort of novelty scheme to make his family instantaneously wealthy—anything that avoids long, hard work. Neither scenario proves fruitful for Dagwood, as often his boss will violently reject his request (March 15, 1963, Figure 13), or he simply stays on his couch dreaming of his money instead of being proactive about making it (March 21, 1939, Figure 14). Here, readers see sloth and greed coalesce into one big, bad decision-making machine. Dagwood is unsatisfied with his middle class lifestyle, but wanting money and wanting to earn money are two different things. And, as the strip demonstrates, one will be punished and the other would be rewarded. The Bumsteads will never be rich, and for someone as desiring of money as Dagwood is, that is quite possibly the worst punishment of all.

Blondie: True, Trapped, Tragic

It is undeniable that Blondie was—almost immediately—a star. Her marriage to Dagwood in 1933 made national news. From the beginning, she was infectiously likeable. She had a charm that was both candid and sweet. Chic Young may have written

⁴⁴ Saenger, "Male and Female Relations," 203

her as flighty and flirtatious, but in the early years of the strip she held her own as the crux of its comedy. Later on, Blondie represented the kind of woman that men should want to marry. In many ways, Blondie was tragically perfect. She was never expected to be anything short of perfect, which means that she didn't get much credit for keeping her family together through Dagwood's incompetence. For Blondie, punishment begets more punishment. That is to say, Dagwood is punished for his lack of character, and meanwhile Blondie's sentence is to deal with the man she married at the expense of her individuality. As the years wore on for the strip, Blondie seemed to only exist either to act as the shrew and foil her husband's daydreams, or clean up after his messes (literally and figuratively). Her identity becomes inseparable from her husband's foolishness, and in the end she pays for his mistakes.

Blondie, like most housewives in comic strips, exists largely in service to her husband. As she cooks, cleans, raises children, and keeps the family unfailingly anchored, it is easy to forget that she was once a brazen young woman who flirted with Dagwood's father right in front of him. Probably the most unfortunate aspect of her predicament is that she possesses quite a bit more self-awareness than Dagwood. He may not know he's a failure, but she certainly knows she's married to one. The daily from October 24, 1956 [Figure 15] finds Dagwood waking up from a dream about lounging on a tropical island, noting that in his dream Blondie was cooking his dinner. Her response, the most predictably melancholy punch line, is "I can't get out of the kitchen, even in his dreams." It is nearly impossible not to register the obvious cue for sympathy here; Blondie may be the ideal wife, but that ideal has been shaped by someone who, as Coulton Waugh subtly noted above, probably shouldn't have deserved

her in the first place. Critics of the strip have remarked that because Dagwood is not aware of his problems, he is a pathetic character but not a tragic one.⁴⁵ By that logic, since Blondie seems highly aware of what might be amiss in her life, she is definitely a tragic character. Perhaps Blondie is being punished for her sensual nature in her younger years, but mostly she is being punished because she married someone who does not know how to exist in a partnership. It is a cycle that cannot be broken; the longer she exists in service of Dagwood, the more incompetent he will be.

Conclusion

Though *Blondie* runs to this day and is arguably still nearly as popular as it was in its first three decades, the principal characters are viewed more as curiosities; they have not changed. The daily gags stay topical—or as topical as *Blondie* ever was—but the Blondie and Dagwood characters remain as ordinary, and sadly saccharine as ever. Current readers seem to extend a bit of frustrated disconnect at how the strip has seemed to remain of its own moment (that is, of the 1940s and 50s, approximately). Satirical comics blogger Josh Fruhlinger (also known as the Comics Curmudgeon) notes about a *Blondie* daily [Figure 16] from February 5 of 2014:

Today's *Blondie* is mostly standard-issue Mismatched Marital Hijinx, but I have to say I'm pretty in love with the weird and delightful second panel. It's as if the sudden disruption of their comfortably distant routine has sent Blondie into a vertiginous spiral; even the low-level boost in emotional intimacy that comes from just making eye contact with her husband has sent her reeling. This is a couple that deliberately arranged their living room furniture so they don't have to see each other even when they're in the same room, remember. After only a moment of looking at her husband, she takes the opportunity afforded by his sipping his coffee to put her head most of the way down, maybe to overwhelm

⁴⁵ Berger, *The Comic-stripped American*, 111.

her senses by taking a big whiff of whatever's on her plate, or maybe to just calm her nerves so she doesn't vomit. In short order, she needs the barrier between her and Dagwood again. This experiment in spousal interaction is now *over*.⁴⁶

The point of Fruhlinger's commentary is fairly unambiguous: Blondie and Dagwood have not changed in the better part of a century. The idea that Blondie and Dagwood were once the model couple probably contributes to the sameness in their character. Again, we can establish a comfortable distance between ourselves and these characters now because they don't belong to our time. They are still living according to values that were acceptable and popular in the 1940s. The comic strip universe is unique in that gives readers the same backdrop every single day. Not only have their circumstances not changed, but they are still stuck in the same purgatory they entered into back in 1933.

⁴⁶ Josh Fruhlinger, "What If Snuffy Looks into This 'Getting High' Business???", Comics Curmudgeon, last modified February 5, 2014, <http://joshreads.com/?p=20650>.

Chapter Two

Little Orphan Annie: Virtue and the Good Society

"Take my advice and build a house in the country. Build a wall around it. And get ready to protect yourself. The way things are going, people who earn their living someday are going to have to fight off the bums."
—Harold Gray⁴⁷

By the 1950s, *Little Orphan Annie*, created by Harold Gray in 1924, was the number three comic strip in the United States, just behind *Blondie* and *Dick Tracy*. From the early episodes of the strip, *Little Orphan Annie* was outwardly and unapologetically political. From a business perspective, syndicates were usually unwilling to publish strips with any particular political leaning due to the variety of ideologies reflected in their papers, and most artists took heed. Harold Gray, who was a student and admirer of political cartoonist John McCutcheon and took the name for his strip from a work by children's poet James Whitcomb Riley, had other ideas. Where other strips erred on the safer side and did not actively integrate politics into their strips, *Little Orphan Annie* put up little pretense as to the message it was trying to send. Though a strip like *Dick Tracy*, for example, obviously resulted from a gritty and violent urban crime scene in Chicago in the 1920s and made its adoration of the police officer figure fairly unambiguous, no strip was so explicit with its conservative political leanings as *Little Orphan Annie*.

Little Orphan Annie is, at its core, the story of a man with a strong moral fiber and an even stronger work ethic; it is also about the passing of that moral fiber and work ethic onto the next generation, in the form of a precocious red-haired girl named

⁴⁷ Al Capp, introduction to *Arf! The Life and Hard Times of Little Orphan Annie 1935-1945*, by Harold Gray (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1970), 1.

Annie. Just as *Blondie* presents us with a purgatory for the Bumsteads, *Little Orphan Annie* gives readers a fantasy world, one where good always wins and failure results from some sort of personal deficiency (and not of some varied set of circumstances). Essentially, Oliver “Daddy” Warbucks was the person that, in a good, virtuous society, Dagwood Bumstead should have emulated. Dagwood and Warbucks present an interesting dynamic across their strips. In many ways, they are two sides of the same coin; they are the embodiments of the world generated by bad decisions and the one generated by good decisions, respectively. *Little Orphan Annie* clearly reflects the idea that success in life is tied to goodness, patience and order. With those values exists happiness and safety; without them, danger and corruption.

Surveys done in the late 1940s and early 50s indicate that readers whose favorite strips were *Blondie* and *Little Orphan Annie* also reported a sense of dissatisfaction and emptiness in their lives.⁴⁸ That sense of dissatisfaction could have been related to any number of elements in a person’s life (though some scholars, such as Arthur Asa Berger, seem to think it all amounted to socioeconomics). So, the overall impact of *Little Orphan Annie* was rather nuanced. The strip seems like it was there to give readers an idea of what their lives could be like—if only they tried harder, for instance. For those unhappy with their lives, Warbucks and Annie offer a clear and seemingly easy solution. Annie leads the next generation by standing as a shining example of virtue and hard work. Where Dagwood’s pathetic failure as a leader was a sign that he simply did not work hard enough, *Little Orphan Annie* seemed to tell the story of the scientific opposite of his deficiency. Al Capp once said that Orphan Annie

⁴⁸ Berger, *The Comic-stripped American*, 90.

was just a little girl that spoke the Republican platform of 1920.⁴⁹ Not only that, but a strip like *Little Orphan Annie* that would stress old-fashioned hard work and self-reliance fed well into the disillusionment and skepticism about Progressive politics that followed the First World War. Indeed, the format of the comic strip universe itself is fitting for the broad conservatism the strip was famous for: our heroes do not age, nor do they change. Like *Blondie*, *Little Orphan Annie* reinforces cultural regularity, the idea that work must be rewarded and failure is the sign of moral deficiency.⁵⁰ In Annie's world, luck and success are the marks of virtue. Also like *Blondie*, the environment of *Little Orphan Annie* is rather grim once readers take a closer look; it simultaneously promotes self-reliance while creating saviors out of Warbucks and Annie (a savior for the next generation). Ultimately, this strip is about people who do the right things and their condemnation of people who do the wrong things. Where *Blondie's* universe punishes Dagwood, *Annie's* universe rewards her and Warbucks by surrounding them with people who reinforce their behavior. In other words, the suffering of the poor and unfortunate people around them justifies the actions and ideologies of Annie and Warbucks. This chapter will look at the strip in terms of its treatment of Daddy Warbucks as a hero elevated above the masses of common men, as well as in terms of its treatment of Annie as a vessel for moral character to be passed onto the next generation.

⁴⁹ Al Capp, "It's Hideously True: Creator of Li'l Abner Tells Why His Hero Is (Sob!) Wed," *Life*, March 31, 1952, 102.

⁵⁰ McLuhan, "The Mechanical Bride: The Folklore," in *Arguing Comics: Literary Masters*, 102.

Daddy Warbucks: The Father of All Things Good

In many ways, the strip treats Daddy Warbucks as more than just a father to Annie, but as a form of a patriarch for the society contained within the strip's universe. Even though Annie is clearly the star of the strip, Warbucks has the role of being the moral center of the story—the one responsible for Annie and her contribution to society. So, if Annie represents the generation that will grow into model citizens, Warbucks represents their leader. He is the one who will foster that growth and make sure that his own conservative values remain cemented in the generations that follow. Elsewhere his role as a leader is quite clear; often when he is not physically present in the strip, others remark that he is off doing something for the greater good. Readers should assume that when Warbucks is not around he is elsewhere working, contributing to a virtuous society. In a 1963 essay entitled "One Shade of Gray: The Art of Personal Journalism Complicated by Clear Conscience," Robert H. Abel asks (maybe rhetorically, but probably ironically), "Does Daddy Warbucks represent the good ol US of A? Is he 180 million Americans, the constitution, hominy grits, apple pie, mother's day, and baseball personified in one tuxedoed, diamond studded American aristocrat?"⁵¹ An editor for the *New Republic* answers, "as readers are informed he is just a great, big, lovable old daddy not only to his own workers, but the world in general."⁵² Even though readers would become more and more critical of Warbucks and the fantastical universe he inhabited, Harold Gray (who died in 1968), created a father

⁵¹ Robert H. Abel, "One Shade of Gray: The Art of Personal Journalism Complicated by Clear Conscience," in *The Funnies: An American Idiom*, ed. Robert H. Abel and David Manning White (London: Collier-Macmillan Ltd., 1963), 125.

⁵² James Clendenin, "Fascism in the Funnies," *The New Republic*, September 18, 1935, 147.

character, somebody who should serve as an answer for any personal, professional and ethical issues among the strip's readers. And the reason that the strip can present him as someone that readers should want to emulate is that Warbucks possesses all the qualities that a person needs to be successful.

More than once throughout the strip's run, the storylines explored the idea of death and legacy, mostly coming out of a discussion of what makes for a whole and proper life. An ongoing story that ran for a few weeks in August 1944 finds Daddy Warbucks suffering from some sort of fever that leaves him bedridden. As his recovery progresses, he and Annie muse on his life. On August 16th [Figure 17], he says, defiantly, "only cowards fear death." The next day [Figure 18] he remarks, without much subtlety, "I've had a good life...Yes! A very good life! I've been successful...But I'm not ashamed of that...I've been honest and, I think, fairly decent...I've lived my life according to my time and generation...Probably it's time for me to go!" The idea that Warbucks thinks he's done well for himself is rather unremarkable; more noteworthy is that he thinks that his character and accomplishments have made his inevitable death acceptable—poetic, even. When Gray was diagnosed with cancer in the early 1960s, his original plan was to have Daddy Warbucks die with him, cementing the legacy of both the artist and protagonist. It is not an uncommon reading of *Little Orphan Annie* that Harold Gray set out on a "crusade to create martyrs out of millionaires," as Senator Richard Neuberger (writing for the Chicago Tribune in 1934) phrased it.⁵³ But this sequence of musings does a lot of work to cement the idea that Warbucks thinks of himself as someone who, for his own good character, would die for the greater good of the society he inhabits.

⁵³ Abel, "One Shade of Gray," in *The Funnies: An American*, 116.

The August 18th 1944 strip [Figure 19] has Warbucks tackling this idea even more pointedly. He says, proudly, “I’ve been what’s called a capitalist....Some have called me a dirty capitalist [emphasis Gray’s]....but I’ve merely used the imagination and common sense and energy that kind providence gave me....It made me wealthy...powerful...hated by some...admired by others...but now? Well Annie...times have changed and I’m old and tired....I guess I have to go!” Again, what is remarkable here is not that he proudly identifies as a capitalist, but that he attributes this facet of his identity to some sort of divinely inspired virtue. Daddy Warbucks is successful because he had to be. Qualities like common sense and a strong work ethic are not things that can be learned, according to him; instead one must be born with them. His words reveal the moral spectrum of the strip to rely heavily on the myth of the chosen few. According to the way he thinks of himself, luck and virtue beget each other in a cyclical way. He sees himself as blessed to be someone who works hard, and his reward is to be in this elite class of highly successful people. That he says his time on this earth is running low only serves to reinforce his status as a martyr. The strip is telling readers, in no uncertain terms, that he did his job and now it is time for the ones that admired him (and those who hated him) to do theirs—but only if they were as divinely blessed as he was.

That Warbucks keeps reminding us that he is very much of his own generation suggests that he is supposed to be one of the last of his kind; his words lend themselves easily to the facet of conservative ideology that the real heroes are part of the older generation, and that it is the younger generation’s job to do right by the legacy they left behind. In *Comic-Stripped American*, Arthur Asa Berger writes,

Daddy Warbucks finds himself somewhat of a loner amongst people who have been corrupted and lost the old virtues. His mission is to prevent evil from triumphing in America, and the general debasement of American society makes it possible for his activities to assume heroic proportions.⁵⁴

It is well documented by Harold Gray's contemporaries and other scholars that he did not support the New Deal, nor was he impressed by any politics after the year 1932.⁵⁵

In 1974, some years after Gray's passing, historian Jerry Robinson wrote that the artist's politics were "basic laissez-faire, rugged individualism, and the traditional pioneering virtues of piety, hard work, and courage." He later quotes Gray as saying:

A publisher once told me that Annie should be on the editorial page. I told him some of the funniest stuff I ever read was in the editorials so why not put them in the comics pages....Liberals and intellectuals are guys who don't do their homework, they don't know history. [I believe in] skinning your own skunks and not asking the government for help.⁵⁶

For someone as deeply political as he was, and for a strip whose internal politics were so transparent in the storylines, it makes sense that Gray would have positioned Daddy Warbucks as a figure who stood for the values that the country was apparently losing over the course of the 1930s (not coincidentally, Gray died a multimillionaire).⁵⁷ Daddy Warbucks always tells Annie how it used to be. Even for the 1920s, this strip seemed to be modeled after an older society; *Little Orphan Annie* operated on something of a Puritan ethic. As sociologist Lyle Shannon wrote for *Public Opinion Quarterly* in 1954, "the strip emphasizes reliance on providence, faith, hope and charity—but not too much

⁵⁴ Berger, *The Comic-stripped American*, 84

⁵⁵ Robinson, *The Comics*, 89.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 90.

charity.”⁵⁸ To that end, Daddy Warbucks consistently comes across as the ultimate benevolent capitalist.

Literary historian Elizabeth Long notes that over a fifth of best-selling novels from the years 1945-1955 feature a protagonist obtaining, somehow, a form of entrepreneurial success.⁵⁹ The popularity of these novels, as with that of *Little Orphan Annie* may have more than a little to do with readers’ self-reported dissatisfaction with their own socioeconomic standings. A hero like Daddy Warbucks would not have just indulged a millionaire fantasy, but also would have positioned his success as benefitting his entire community. She says:

It seems fair to label as “entrepreneurial” the implicit assumption about success that suffuses character, plot, setting, and tone in these novels because it...strongly links the individual’s saga of self-improvement to the triumphant advance of world progress. Because the individual contributes to ideals and a community beyond himself, his achievement transcends the limits of the narrowly personal, and its effects may surpass the limits of his lifespan.⁶⁰

Given Long’s description of the protagonists of these novels, it seems that Daddy Warbucks is very much in dialogue with literary tropes of the mid-20th century. His personal success is important, certainly, but even more important is what his personal success contributes to society at large. Part of his reward for being as “entrepreneurial” as he claims to be, is the aggrandizement he gets from having helped the world around him.

⁵⁸ Lyle Shannon, "The Opinions of Little Orphan Annie and Her Friends," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1954): 174

⁵⁹ Long, *The American Dream*, 63.

⁶⁰ Long, *The American Dream*, 63.

The Dagwood Connection

While chapter one dealt largely with the number of factors that defined Dagwood Bumstead's failure, this chapter focuses on what defines Daddy Warbucks's level of success. When we discuss *Blondie* and *Little Orphan Annie* together, it would be dishonest not to acknowledge that they both exist in completely different environments and deal with two completely different types of relationships (husband and wife, and father and daughter, more or less). The kind of politicization that occurs in *Little Orphan Annie* would never have worked in *Blondie* because that strip was strictly about the home—and because Chic Young always denied any incidence of purposeful social critique.⁶¹ *Annie* was less about the home itself and more about the transfer of values from the home into the outside world and using them against everyday corruption and atrocity. In short, these two strips should really have nothing to do with one another. *Little Orphan Annie* does not even bother with the ordinary, domestic, husband-wife dynamic that *Blondie* embodies. In fact, Warbucks's unnamed wife is conspicuously absent for all but a few early episodes in the strip when she surreptitiously sends Annie back to the orphanage while her husband is away in Siberia on business.⁶²

But there is one important connection between the two strips that readers (at the very least current ones with the distance working to their advantage) would be remiss not to make: Dagwood is exactly the kind of lazy, incompetent, immature champion of mediocrity that Daddy Warbucks would have loathed. When Warbucks talks about the problems with society, and the people that hated him throughout his long and productive life, in reality he's talking about the Dagwoods of the world.

⁶¹ Young, Young, and Marschall, *Blondie and Dagwood's America*, 29.

⁶² O'Sullivan, *The Great American Comic*, 25.

Dagwood's inadequacies often made for the punch lines for *Blondie* dailies, but *Annie* those same inadequacies are condemned and Daddy Warbucks is presented as the logical opposite of everything that Dagwood represents. Warbucks may not operate within the same domestic space as Dagwood, but while *Blondie* ostensibly tries to normalize the fears and insecurities of American men, *Annie* advances those fears right to foreground and justifies them in the form of an unattainable solution. For example, in the fourth panel of a June 1937 daily [Figure 20], Warbucks says, "Money, service, love, comfort, security—each may be one man's dream of happiness. At least till he gets it—well I know what I want—success! But I suppose that, to a lot of people, would brand me as crazy." In just a few sentences, Warbucks has at once designated the dreams of others as unattainable while isolating himself from them and elevating himself above them. Essentially, Warbucks presented himself as the reason that people like Dagwood should feel worse about themselves. Arthur Asa Berger continues:

Transcendent heroes who loom high above the ordinary man by their very stature reveal the pettiness and triviality of the common man. By contrasting our lot with his, Warbucks makes us aware of our own alienation. Warbucks's heroics and the fact that we need his heroics serves to point out our weakness, inadequacy, and powerlessness.⁶³

Where *Blondie* attempts to make light of the masculine psychologies present in the strip, *Little Orphan Annie* takes advantage of that vulnerability and uses it to establish a clear and necessary distinction between them and Daddy Warbucks.

Daddy Warbucks not only establishes a distance between himself and the kind of man Dagwood is, but also the kind of man Dagwood would be if he weren't so lazy. It's not just the poor and unfortunate that Warbucks condemns, but the dishonestly rich as

⁶³ Berger, *The Comic-Stripped American*, 89.

well. Here, it is important to remember that a long-running gag in the *Blondie* strip was countless half-baked get-rich-quick schemes that Dagwood kept trying to get off the ground. And he might have pulled one or two of them off, had he been so proactive as to even get off of his couch. Harold Gray and Warbucks take aim at those people, too. The characters in the strip are obviously aware of dishonesty and corruption, but ceaselessly maintain that they possess a moral fiber that others do not. A 1945 daily has Warbucks exclaiming, "Because a few men have gained riches by crooked dealings, [Phil O. Bluster, a politician] and his kind scream that all rich men are dishonest rascals."⁶⁴ Here not only does Warbucks's (or Gray's) distrust of the American political system boil over, but in his statement he also works to separate himself from others who have found themselves upon a large fortune. His money was hard earned, he reminds readers, not stolen.

Oliver the War Hero

Duty to one's society is not the only recurring theme in *Little Orphan Annie*; duty to one's country is named as a priority among the virtuous as well. Nearly every villain the Annie and Warbucks face are identified immediately as either Nazis or Communists.⁶⁵ It seems that to Daddy Warbucks, a sturdy sense of patriotism is the vehicle through which he perfects his own values. In other words, doing a service to his country is the ultimate output of everything he learned at home; the threefold responsibility to self, community, and country reaches completion in the dailies that discuss Warbucks's service. As his name suggests, readers are supposed to understand

⁶⁴ Abel, "One Shade of Gray," in *The Funnies: An American*, 117

⁶⁵ Roger Miller, "When Orphan Annie Went to War," *Prairie Schooner* 45, no. 3 (Fall 1971): 204.

that he is literally a war profiteer. But the source of his wealth is never a point of contention within the strip. It is simply assumed that he has money, so obviously he worked hard for it doing something for his country.

Pitting Annie against Nazis or Communists is more or less the grandest form of good versus evil. The strip taps into that basic conflict by using obvious tropes and stock characters in order to draw connections between them and the political conflicts happening in the real world. In a 1959 essay for *The American Scholar*, Kenneth Eble remarks, "In Orphan Annie, for example, that reincarnation of the Old West, Sam Sundown was really Uncle Sam, Wolf Gnaf, the villain, was essentially the faithful likeness of Khrushchev, and Daddy Warbucks fitfully reappeared looking more like Eisenhower each time."⁶⁶ By using simple characters to talk about contemporary political issues and by reducing the conflict down to a clear cut division of good and evil, Harold Gray makes it easy for readers to place, without hesitation, Daddy Warbucks on the side of all things right and good. Obviously readers can't and shouldn't identify with a caricatured Khrushchev, so their only other option is Daddy Warbucks, an accessible Eisenhower. Daddy Warbucks's sense of conviction allows him to conflate his duty to himself to be a good, virtuous individual and his duty to his country. In an exchange with a minor character he says, "Only two basic rules do I insist on, Johnny. Be honest and true to the people of our country and to yourself, and be tough enough to stay that way."⁶⁷ Being a paragon of virtue is something that can be applied to inner goodness and outer service; it tests the resolve and separated the strong from the weak. Later, in

⁶⁶ Kenneth E. Eble, "Our Serious Comics," in *The Funnies: An American Idiom*, ed. Robert H. Abel and David Manning White (London: Collier-Macmillan Ltd., 1963), 100.

⁶⁷ Abel, "One Shade of Gray," in *The Funnies*, 126.

a daily from 1942 [Figure 21], (after declaring that he will give all he has to his country) Warbucks says in the third panel, “at my age I know how to ruin a lot of our enemies—in battle! I propose to do just that—attack! It’s the only way to win!” With these two statements, Warbucks again isolates himself; his point, subtle as it may be, is that only a few can be strong enough to successfully serve their country, and therefore only a few can reap the rewards of everything that the country is fighting for.

Annie: All Things Good and Great For the Next Generation

A strip about kids and their adventures was not original in the least. But nearly every strip that was about kids seemed focused on giving readers a slice of life as the children saw it. They were almost always unsupervised and engaged in all kinds of activities that highlighted the innocence of a child. What was different about Annie was that she was always surrounded by adults. There were rarely (if ever during the first few decades of the strip’s run) other children around, and since everything else in *Little Orphan Annie* is egregiously unsubtle, readers have to assume that this is on purpose. Even though Annie is consistently with adults, she is never with anyone like her. She is alone, facing the cruel world without the luxury of solidarity—she might just have been the most sanctimonious eight-year-old to ever appear in the comics. Her circumstances as an orphan at the strip’s opening have, more than once, been maligned as something straight out of a Dickens novel, and for good reason.⁶⁸ Annie embodies the idea that all people are alone and must take care of themselves. Annie’s behavior is the logical conclusion of all the suggestions towards Daddy Warbucks’s sacrifices; the older

⁶⁸ Eble, “Our Serious Comics,” in *The Funnies: An American*, 105.

generation (at least the ones that have done it right) has to die so that the younger generation can carry on their values. Again, *Little Orphan Annie* does not necessarily take place in a domestic space, but it does take the stance that values properly learned in the home receive fruitful rewards out in the world. Like Daddy Warbucks, Annie reinforces, as pointed out by critics of the strip, the idea that the virtuous are necessarily isolated, that we are the masters of our own destiny, and that staying virtuous involves influencing the rest of the world, not the other way around.

Annie represents the idea that it all starts at home, something that, if readers believe in everything he says and does, Daddy Warbucks has already proven to be true. She is saved from a savage existence (the streets, so to speak) and brought into a home where she can receive a proper upbringing. Their first meeting (with a rare appearance from Mrs. Warbucks, Figure 22) shows Daddy Warbucks, who makes a point of insisting that Annie call him “Daddy,” saying in the final panel, “Annie doesn’t need charity—just give her an even break and she’ll do the rest—charity!! Bah!” With everything she learns from Daddy Warbucks, she can go out and enjoy a good life, free from danger, corruption and instability. A dismissal of criticism for the strip often includes the statement that she is just a little girl who speaks her mind, but that is only half true. She speaks somebody’s mind, but it isn’t hers. Everything she says comes directly from Warbucks’s mind, it appears as though Gray made some attempt (unsuccessfully, mostly) to gild her words in innocent language so that it seemed more believable coming from a girl aged no more than eight. The strip is often regarded as a fantasy—a would-be adventure strip dripping in various domestic entanglements—and part of that has to do with the impossible maturity in Annie’s language. A daily from 1936 (the

same year President Roosevelt was elected to a second term in nothing short of a landslide victory, carrying over 98% of the electoral vote)⁶⁹ shows Annie scrubbing floors and announcing, "At least I'm here earnin' my keep and not livin' off o' the taxpayers!"⁷⁰ In another from late 1935 [Figure 23], she declares defiantly (shortly after deciding that eating comes before schooling, revealing something about a survival ethic that she probably learned from Warbucks), "'Free'! Huh- *nothing* is free! It all costs *somebody*. Too many people are livin' free off o' other people. I'll keep trying to earn my way!" Annie here becomes the voice for the opposition to the New Deal, and she demonstrates that her personality is comprised of little more than a collection of Warbucks-isms. The feedback loop between what Warbucks teaches Annie and what she takes away from his lessons is unsurprisingly obvious and immediate. In a two-day series from 1944 [Figure 24], in response to Annie's complaint about the way child labor laws have impacted her opportunity to work, Daddy Warbucks says, "But we, who are determined to be independent, will always find the way...but legally!" The next day [Figure 25], the first two panels show Annie talking to Sandy the dog, saying, "Daddy's right! In spite o' everything, I *will* stay independent and make my own way somehow! And I'll never break any law no matter what!" It is possible that what readers are supposed to gather from this sequence is that Daddy Warbucks is positioning Annie to become the version of him for the next generation. It is problematic that, in a world full of evildoers and corrupt bargainers, Annie learns more to regurgitate knowledge than to actually seek it out and develop it on her own, but first and foremost, if Warbucks gets his way, Annie will end up like him.

⁶⁹ Eble, "Our Serious Comics," in *The Funnies: An American*, 101.

⁷⁰ Reynolds, *Comic Strip Artists*, 52.

The heroic alienation within *Little Orphan Annie* extends from Warbucks to Annie as well. As has been established, she is always surrounded by adults. Beyond just being the star of the strip, by being the only child in a scene of adults (including the inexcusably stereotyped and exoticized servants Punjab and Asp) she naturally draws the social focus to her. Generally speaking, Annie never involves herself with anyone who doesn't feed the moralist fantasy on which the strip operates. In *One Shade of Gray*, Robert Abel (partially quoting Lyle Shannon) describes Annie's relationship with other minor characters in the strip:

Annie's associates tend to be either great captains of industry or the poor and unfortunate who lack initiative or are unwilling to work for a living. Her poor associates are not the great masses of people whose daily labors barely keep them above the subsistence level, but instead are the poor whose personal disorganization clearly has no connection with the disorganization which exists in our economic system....The poor and unfortunate usually benefit from their contact with the ambitious and always energetic Annie.⁷¹

Given the surveys done to draw conclusions about readers' feelings of inadequacy in their own lives, it would make sense to put them on the same level in the narrative as these "associates" of Annie. She lifts people above their mediocre existence—but not so far above it that she eliminates the comfortable distance between herself and the others. This relationship between Annie and the other characters—one that is mostly built upon class distinction—reinforces the idea that she and Warbucks are where they are for a reason, and so are they. Annie's relationship with the other characters poises her to become the Daddy Warbucks for the next generation; she is isolated in her own virtue and as a result has a responsibility to be charitable (but, again, not too charitable) to those around her.

⁷¹ Abel, "One Shade of Gray," in *The Funnies: An American*, 116.

Conclusion

When all is said and done, *Little Orphan Annie* takes conservative, homespun values and puts them to practical use in the real world. The central characters act on ideas of sacrifice and isolation; Warbucks's reward for his martyrdom is a legacy in the form of a child that will carry on his beliefs and ideologies long after he is dead. In the process, Annie learns that if she acts like her father, she can have all of the earthly rewards he father enjoyed. Annie continues to be something of an all-purpose cultural warrior; in 1977, a twist on the strip placed Annie within an anti-Nixon context, turning the political tables for a stage adaptation.⁷² Five years later, all of the political songs were removed for a film adaptation better suited for the Reagan era.⁷³ She is a symbol for the power and responsibility of the younger generation to maintain the world their elders grew up in. The heavy-handed political implications of a strip like *Little Orphan Annie* are difficult to miss: this is a strip on how to raise children in our own image. It is a strip about the preservation of family teachings, and why a good life can only come from implementing those values first learned in the home. All of the politically-motivated language that's used in the strip, while undoubtedly inspired by Daddy Warbucks, is regurgitated by a little girl who can carry the torch for the old generation's values. We might be able to look at the universe of *Little Orphan Annie* now, at a comfortable distance, and say that it is nothing more than a fantasy. We all know that a certain reciprocity of virtue, an idea that doing good will definitely bring us a good life is not nearly as seamless as it is presented in the strip, but the characters seem to believe

⁷² Logan Hill, "'Annie': A Culture Warrior Rides Again," Bloomberg Businessweek, last modified November 29, 2012, accessed April 14, 2014, <http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2012-11-29/annie-a-culture-warrior-rides-again>

⁷³ Hill, "'Annie': A Culture Warrior," Bloomberg Businessweek.

in it wholeheartedly. Warbucks and Annie live in a world that is much simpler, and much easier to succeed in, than reality ever has been. If the strip's message is to be believed, that the younger generation will be our legacy and reward for a life well-lived, then Annie might just be a cultural warrior for generations to come.

Chapter Three

Li'l Abner: Foolish Men and Fearless Women

"I had always been for those who were despised, disgraced, and denounced by other people. A satirist has only one gift: he sees where the fraud and fakery are. I turned around and let the other side have it."
—Al Capp⁷⁴

It is common among readers and scholars to point out that Al Capp (1909-1979), creator of *Li'l Abner*, had something of a contrarian streak—personally, politically, and professionally. As an artist who had drawn and written for several other strips before stepping out on his own, and whose reason for developing a new strip in the first place was a feud with the artist for whom he had been ghosting, Capp certainly must have been aware of the agenda and aesthetic operating within comic strips at the time.⁷⁵ And he also must have been aware that he would be expected to participate in those conventions. He must have known that the status quo dictated that he write and draw for a northern, middle class, suburban, family-oriented audience, and appeal to their concern for prudence, propriety and virtue. Whoever Capp chose to place at the center of his story, there would have to be an upstanding hero. Families would have to be whole and stable, and they should buy things, or want to buy things. Finally, they would be expected to uphold certain standards of behavior, especially as they pertained to relationships between men and women. It should come as no surprise, then, that Al Capp cared little about the status quo, and *Li'l Abner* did not live up to those expectations.

⁷⁴ Reynolds, *Comic Strip Artists* 109.

⁷⁵ "Li'l Abner," Don Markstein's Toonopedia, <http://www.toonopedia.com/abner.htm>.

In 1934, Al Capp sold his new strip to United Features Syndicate. King Features Syndicate, the Hearst Corporation's ruling comics distributor, had requested several changes from Capp for the strip, (the details of which remain unknown) and he refused to sell the strip as anything less than what he had originally envisioned.⁷⁶ Instead, he sold it for less money and more creative freedom. Capp's particular brand of satire and social commentary as told through his Dogpatch universe (a fictional town whose location was never explicitly specified) has prompted scholars to discuss what in particular made *Li'l Abner* so subversive for at least half century.⁷⁷

Capp's politics (fluid as they might have been), his positions as a disabled man, as a Jewish man, and as a champion for the working class combined for one of the most uniquely sardonic voices in the comic strip landscape. Throughout the 43-year run of *Li'l Abner*, Capp was critical and at times scathing of virtually every facet of American culture—even of the comics world itself. Capp critiqued the world around him by first critiquing the world of comic strips, and his rejection of the rules of comics (and his refusal to present the strip as anything less than what he had originally envisioned) separates *Li'l Abner* from other strips of the period. And it firmly positions *Li'l Abner* as the loudest and most shrewd contrarian strip for the years that it ran. Interestingly enough, the satirical elements of the strip highlight the cultural markers and tropes so pervasive in other, more traditional American domestic comic strips of this time. For decades, Capp maintained his claim that he was simply out to fight prejudices in whatever form they took, which is why it should come as no surprise to readers that he

⁷⁶ Reynolds, *Comic Strip Artists*, 109.

⁷⁷ "Dogpatch Biography," Steve Krupp's Gallery and Books, http://deniskitchen.com/Merchant2/merchant.mvc?Screen=CTGY&Category_Code=bios.dogpatch.

made his hero a slow, illiterate and gullible hillbilly named Abner.⁷⁸ While, generally, the strip can be seen as a revolt against the comic strips running in papers at the time, the way that it treated matters of gender and sexuality stands out as the most subversive.

In a culture that perhaps he thought had senseless expectations for both men and women, Capp initiated a number of bold gender role-reversals. *Li'l Abner* in many ways rejected the gender asymmetry in what Elinor Ochs called the "Father Knows Best" dynamic, something she defines as "a prefeminist... conceptualization of idyllic domestic order."⁷⁹ She goes on:

Within this dynamic, the father is typically set up—through his own and others' recurrent narrative practices—to be primary audience, judge, and critic of family members' actions, conditions, thoughts, and feelings as narrative protagonists or as co-narrators.⁸⁰

Though Abner Yokum is the lead character and the strip's namesake, he isn't exactly in charge of much of the narrative progression of the strip. He and the other men in the strip often defer to the decisions of the town's women—Mammy Yokum is the mayor of Dogpatch, after all. Daisy Mae Scragg, not Abner, dictates the nearly twenty-year narrative arc surrounding their courtship and the question of whether or not they would eventually marry. And the strip's longest running narrative device presents readers with an annual event where women literally chase men all over town to choose their husbands. The men of Dogpatch were charming and kindhearted, certainly, but most of them—and the title character, the alleged hero, is no exception—were daft,

⁷⁸ Al Capp, introduction to *The Best of Li'l Abner* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1978), 12

⁷⁹ Elinor Ochs and Carolyn Taylor, "The 'Father Knows Best' Dynamic in Dinnertime Narratives," in *Gender Articulated: Language and the Socially Constructed Self*, ed. Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall (New York: Routledge, 1995), 101.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

incompetent, and immature. Dogpatch's women, on the other hand, took control of their own lives, and often eclipsed their male counterparts. While the turning of traditional masculinity and femininity on their heads was only one component to Al Capp's satirical contribution to the comics canon, those redefinitions of what men and women ought to be and do are some of the most revolutionary aspects of *Li'l Abner*. All three strips are named after their protagonists. It is quite peculiar then, that both *Blondie* and *Little Orphan Annie* seem to use a female lead to tell a story largely about men, but *Li'l Abner* does the opposite; it places a sweet but incompetent young man at the center of a story that is, for the most part, about the women in his life.

Dogpatch's Women: Sadie, Daisy Mae, and Mammy

In 1934, the papers had comic strips featuring docile wives and charming daughters—gracious women and respectful young ladies. Only a year earlier, United Features Syndicate had displaced the *Fritzi Ritz* strip about a bold and highly sexualized flapper in favor of the much tamer, much safer *Nancy* strip, about Fritzi's eight-year-old niece.⁸¹ That was also the year that Blondie and Dagwood married and settled into their domestic life—Blondie went from a flapper to not much more than a simple man's wife. *Li'l Abner* featured an entirely different kind of woman, one that often took center stage over the various men in her life. He may very well have been frustrated with the ever-centered and sensible matriarchs such as Blondie Bumstead, who always existed simply in service to Dagwood. Or perhaps he was bemoaning a youth misguided on femininity,

⁸¹ "Nancy," Don Markstein's Toonopedia, <http://www.toonopedia.com/nancy.htm>.

such as Annie, who said, “washin’ dishes is a woman’s job.”⁸² In any case, the comic strip woman takes on quite a different role in *Li'l Abner*, and indeed it is no accident that Daisy Mae is the one who relentlessly chases Abner until he finally agrees to marry her in 1952 (and not the other way around). While Capp never specifically addressed any claims about whether or not he had purposefully embedded any kind of feminist message in his work, it matters little what he said or didn't say, as the work often speaks for itself: the women in *Li'l Abner* had a form of agency and power where the Blondies, Annies, the Dotty Dripples, and the Maggies of the comic strip universe did not.⁸³ Through Sadie Hawkins Day, the nationally-celebrated event that provided a space for women to dictate their own romantic lives (if only for a day), Daisy Mae's tireless and ultimately successful pursuit of Abner, and Mammy Yokum's larger-than-life personality, Al Capp critically examined the role of women in comic strips. In doing so, he pointedly and humorously turned the tables on traditional courtship and family hierarchy.

The *Li'l Abner* daily from November 16, 1937 [Figure 26] shows the first documentation of Sadie Hawkins Day, an event that would soon become a staple among universities across the country. The narration on the far left panel reads, “For 15 years, Sadie Hawkins, homely daughter of Dogpatch's earliest settler, had failed to catch a husband. Her father in desperation, one day called together all the eligible bachelors of Dogpatch.” The middle panel shows only the smoke from a gunshot and a bolded “BOOM” as Sadie begins her race for a husband. According to Pappy Hawkins, the first shot fires indicates to the men of Dogpatch to begin running; the second is for Sadie to

⁸² Berger, *The Comic-stripped American*, 80.

⁸³ Of *Dotty Dripple* (1943-1989) and *Bringing Up Father* (1913-2000), respectively.

start chasing, and whoever she catches, she marries. The final panel details that her success was so inspiring to other potential spinsters that Sadie Hawkins Day becomes an annual event [Figure 27]. Even before Capp introduced Sadie Hawkins Day races to his strip, *Li'l Abner* was already immensely popular. Not two years later, *Life* Magazine ran a story about Sadie Hawkins Day events at a Texas university, noting that races were taking place at over 200 colleges nationwide.⁸⁴ The piece featured crude photographs of barefoot youths running, climbing trees, and strolling with their partners following long, and undoubtedly exhausting days of activities. Thus, every year around mid-November, there would be a strip to commemorate Sadie Hawkins; Capp once recalled receiving thousands of letters from college deans as early as June every year asking when exactly the holiday would take place that year, so they could prepare in advance for the festivities.⁸⁵

On an immediate level, the influence and significance that *Li'l Abner* held within American culture is evidenced just by the fact that it inspired a widely popular national event; life imitated art here in a big way. However, the actual event of Sadie Hawkins Day and everything it represents requires further examination, especially when readers consider that *Li'l Abner* was a satirical strip that teased and critiqued contemporary American culture. Sadie Hawkins Day within the strip might well have been Capp's way of pointing out a cultural condition in which young women were expected to defer to a man's decision when it came to relationships and marriage. Nobody wants Sadie, so her father creates a situation in which she can choose her own husband. In the end, it matters little that the impetus for the first Sadie Hawkins day was that Pappy Hawkins

⁸⁴ "On Sadie Hawkins Day Girls," 32.

⁸⁵ Capp, "It's Hideously True," 101.

was afraid his daughter would become a spinster—that single womanhood was simply not an option. What matters is that he tries to cure this fear by putting the power and the action in his daughter's hands. Capp could have easily written Pappy Hawkins bribing Dogpatch's eligible bachelors with some sort of modern dowry. Instead, Capp radically reverses the rules of courtship and forces men to submit to the desires of the town's women.

The early real-world iterations of the Sadie Hawkins Day, however, seemed to parody the strip, and slightly miss the point of Capp reclaiming the power of courtship for women, attractive and unattractive alike. The photos in the *Life* spread, one of which with a caption that reads, "Chased by Dorothy Ditterline, girl-shy Harold Hackney leaps over a hedge to safety," show women as zealous hunters and the young men as helpless victims.⁸⁶ Overall, the photographs give the impression that everyone from the participants in the day's events to the journalist charged with covering them finds the idea of a woman being in charge of her own romantic life endlessly hysterical. The writer of the *Life* story remarks that "girls generally dress as pretty Daisy Mae rather than as homely Sadie Hawkins," thus rendering the idea that a real-life woman as unattractive as Sadie almost as laughable as the day itself.⁸⁷ Predictably, the real-life treatment of Sadie Hawkins Day echoed the cultural problems that inspired the holiday in the first place.

Along with Sadie Hawkins Day, one of the most impressive and recognizable running gags of *Li'l Abner* was Daisy Mae Scragg's chase for Abner's affections. For nearly two decades, Abner narrowly escaped Daisy Mae's traps. Something always

⁸⁶ "On Sadie Hawkins Day," 32.

⁸⁷ "On Sadie Hawkins Day" 32.

foiled her plans: either traveling preacher, Marryin' Sam temporarily loses his license [Figure 28], or the two actually get married only for the union to be voided on account of fraud or some other technicality. Capp once elected to have Daisy Mae get poisoned, and as her dying wish had always been to marry Abner, he obliged [Figure 29].

Fortunately (or unfortunately, as the case may have been for the strip's biggest fans, who wanted little more than to see Daisy Mae and Abner finally tie the knot), Abner didn't have to go through with the wedding after being able to revive her with some "Kickapoo Joy Juice."⁸⁸ But then, in March of 1952, after the protagonist of a strip-within-a-strip called *Fearless Fosdick* gets engaged a neighbor reminds Abner that he took an oath do everything as Fosdick did, he has to go through with the wedding [Figure 30]. When he reads about Fosdick's and Prudence Pimpleton's engagement in the papers, Abner almost breaks the fourth wall, remarking, "Haw!! It don't mean nothin'!! It's th' usual comical strip trick t'keep stupid readers excited!!" Finally, a scared and trapped Abner is inescapably married.

Abner's comment that yet another threat of engagement among the *Fearless Fosdick* characters just serves to keep "stupid readers excited" actually speaks volumes about the significance of Daisy Mae's 18-year-long chase for Abner. For the March 31st issue of *Life*,—released just days after Daisy Mae and Abner's wedding— Al Capp wrote a piece entitled "It's Hideously True!" In it, after establishing that he never planned to marry Abner and Daisy Mae because it gave readers hope, he explains:

The funny comic strip, the kind I wanted to do, was vanishing from the funny page. A frightening new thing had been discovered: namely, that you could sell more papers by worrying people than by amusing them....In their place came a sobbing, screaming, shooting parade of new "comic"

⁸⁸ Capp, "It's Hideously True," 100.

strip characters: an orphan who talked like the Republican platform of 1920 a prizefighter who advised children that brains were better than brawn while beating the brains out of his physically inferior opponents [*Joe Palooka*, Figure 31]; detectives who explored and explained every sordid and sickening byway of crime and then made it all okay by concluding that these attractively blueprinted crimes didn't really pay [*Dick Tracy*, et. al, Figure 32]; and girl reporters who were daily threatened with rape and mutilation [*Brenda Starr*, Figure 33]....But "suspense" strips though enormously effective, disdain fun and fantasy...all I could do was fun and fantasy.⁸⁹

If we consider Abner and Daisy Mae's decades-long courtship as just a trick to keep readers interested, then perhaps Capp was simply using a love story as a vehicle to give *Li'l Abner* all the trappings of a strip that operates with an undercurrent of suspense. This idea also makes Daisy Mae the commander of the strip's suspense. She initiates every scheme to get Abner to marry her, which, in and of itself makes Daisy Mae an anomaly in comic strips. In a later strip, we find out that Daisy Mae convinced the artist of *Fearless Fosdick* to marry the two protagonists.⁹⁰ As a character—even though the strip is ultimately about Abner—she is actually the one to control the emotional journey that readers go on. She is the keeper of the answer to the ultimate question, the one that kept millions of readers interested for 18 years: will they or won't they? Or, more accurately: will she or won't she? This is not a story about a man's romantic gestures and devotion to the woman he loves; it's a story about a woman's schemes to go after something she wants. If suspense as a trope in comic strips was so undoubtedly effective in this time period as Capp notes in his piece for *Life*, and it was what kept readers interested like no other narrative device, then he certainly created suspense

⁸⁹ Capp, "It's Hideously True," 104.

⁹⁰ Capp, "It's Hideously True," 100.

out of a traditionally feminine subject matter—romance—and puts Daisy Mae in the driver's seat.

As Daisy Mae has the peculiar role of being the keeper of the suspense, Abner's mother Mammy Yokum, too, plays an interesting part in the narrative of the strip. Mammy, born Pansy Hunks, is the tough matriarch of the Yokum clan, the town's unofficial mayor, and one of the few in Dogpatch who can actually read.⁹¹ With Mammy, Capp introduces an entirely different kind of mother character, one who is hardly maternal at all. She is not affectionate, and she does not defer to either the men in the town or her husband for instruction. By making her possibly the only literate character in the strip, Capp elevates her above everyone else. Her signature catchphrase, "Ah has spoken!" says it all; she is the voice for the family, and her word is final.⁹² Mammy's function is to preserve order within Dogpatch using her resolve, her integrity, and her famous "goodnight Irene punch."⁹³ Mammy's artistic rendering is peculiar because, while everyone in the Dogpatch universe is crudely drawn and imbued with strange physical features, Mammy is particularly haggard-looking and though smaller, has muscles drawn on her that would have made most of the men in Dogpatch look slight. Mammy is not soft and beautiful like Daisy Mae, and in fact she is quite gruff, but she is the anchor of the Yokum clan. Tellingly, her husband Pappy's real name is Lucifer Ornamental Yokum. The first name of Lucifer speaks to the power dynamic between Mammy and Pappy. Capp probably isn't suggesting that the pint-sized Pappy is some manifestation of the devil, and actually he is a rather inconsequential

⁹¹ Arthur Asa Berger, *Li'l Abner: A Study in American Satire* (New York, NY: Twayne Publishers, 1970), 52.

⁹² Dan Graves, *Being Born: And Other Simple Pleasures* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2005), 77.

⁹³ "Mammy Yokum," Steve Krupp's Gallery and Books, http://deniskitchen.com/Merchant2/merchant.mvc?Screen=CTGY&Category_Code=bios.mammyyokum.

character. But, instead his first name might speak to a certain suspicion regarding his voice, and perhaps the male voice in general. Frequently, Mammy is found saying “good is better than evil because it’s nicer” [Figure 34]. With that aphorism, Mammy makes clear which voice should and will infiltrate the family consciousness, and that of Dogpatch as well. It reinforces her role as the moral center of the strip. Pappy’s middle name says even more about his place in the family in relation to Mammy’s. Throughout the strip, Pappy keeps mostly to the background; he is lazy and incompetent. He doesn’t play a large role in the major storylines of the strip’s run, and rarely says much if anything at all when he is present. Mammy may be gruff and anti-maternal, but she is also benign and principled; Capp’s ultimate statement about women in the comic strip world may well have been the idea that Mammy’s hardness as a mother and a town leader did not preclude her from being a likeable and generally positive influence in Dogpatch. Capp may have removed her femininity as a mother, but not her values of decency and integrity.

As the voice for the moral center of Dogpatch, it also makes some sense that Mammy would be the voice for the disgruntled *Li’l Abner* reader that wanted to see Daisy May and Abner married for so many years. After the couple finally says “I do,” Mammy exclaims, “At last, our dreams—an’ th’ dreams o’ billyuns o’ other decent people has come true!!” [Figure 35]. That statement clearly refers to the overwhelming demand for Daisy Mae and Abner’s union—a friendly reminder from Al Capp that he was well aware of what his readers wanted. What is most striking about this statement is that it would come from Mammy, and perhaps it speaks to the kind of audience Capp wanted for his strip. By having the input of readers and general public opinion align

itself with a female character, Capp makes the suggestion that *Li'l Abner* is written for women—something that was never even vaguely hinted at in a strip with a male lead (or even a female lead, as *Blondie* seems to speak more to male readers than female ones). That the voice of the town, and the voice of the readership, is Mammy's, a female voice, indicates that the power in Dogpatch lies squarely in the hands of its women.

Masculinity in Dogpatch: Abner's Innocence Revisited

As we might have already observed with the dynamic between the Yokum parents, the men in Dogpatch tend to get overpowered by the female residents. They exist constantly in submission to what the women in the town want. However, the strip still has a male lead, and this story still must be about him. That, then, begs the question of exactly what kind of masculinity Abner Yokum represents. The most useful way to answer that question is to critically examine the role of Abner's innocence in the strip. Abner is crass and bumbling in many ways, but mostly he's just wildly kindhearted and naïve. He rarely works, or even appears to ever have a means of supporting himself and his family, which only reinforces the image of his arrested development. Abner Yokum is big and strong, but it is as if it had never occurred to him to use his strength to prove himself as a man. Strips about boxers, for example, were popular in the 1930s (and it is no coincidence that Capp got his start working on the most popular of them all—Ham Fisher's *Joe Palooka*), and part of the reason they were so popular is that they were a perfect platform for hyper-masculinity to exist limitlessly.⁹⁴ Abner, at his size and strength, could have very easily been a boxer, a war hero, or a burly cop (all of whom

⁹⁴ Reynolds, *Comic Strip Artists*, 108.

had starring roles in other contemporary strips).⁹⁵ Instead, we have for our protagonist a young man who is an absolute paragon of simplicity and optimism. In a striking reinvention of the comic strip hero, Abner was not smart, savvy, or ambitious, nor was he particularly interested in women or sex. It becomes evident in his dalliances with Daisy Mae that he simply has no idea what his role in a relationship or a marriage is supposed to be. Perpetually 19 years old, his innocence and childlike qualities make for a radical recalibration of the meaning of masculinity in this strip. In a time when comic strip characters were printed in advertisements right alongside, for instance, the Marlboro Man, it is not difficult to deduce that Abner was nothing like the men who came before him.⁹⁶

It says just as much about the men of Dogpatch as it does about the women that one of the strip's most recognizable tropes has men running away from women. The short of it in *Li'l Abner* is that the men are simply terrified of women; Abner is hopelessly clueless as to what he is supposed to do about Daisy Mae, or any woman for that matter. In one of the several instances in which he is saved from marriage by some technicality or another (this time they actually get married, but the union is later voided), he carries his new bride over the threshold and, shown in total silhouette, immediately says, "Awright. Kin ah go now? Ah reckon as has done everythin' thet's expected of a groom" [Figure 36]. Abner's innocence and fear render intimate relations with a woman completely inconceivable for him. There are two possible ways to read this panel: he simply has no idea what happens on the wedding night, or he knows and is so terrified he decides to deflect in hopes he does not have to go through with it.

⁹⁵ Joe Palooka, Daddy Warbucks, and Dick Tracy, respectively.

⁹⁶ Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 112.

Either way, that he and Daisy (who actually turns out to be only a woman posing as Daisy) are shown only in silhouette only serves to echo Abner's choice to shield himself from the realities of the wedding night. Therefore, the 18-year-long protraction of Abner and Daisy's union not only added to the suspense regarding when she would finally catch him, but also regarding when Abner would finally become intimate with a woman, and lose his innocence. As Donald Phelps writes in a 1969 essay called "Over the Cliff" about our protagonist, "Abner's implacable virginity was...the arch tease of the comic strip world. Too, it was central to that secrecy which gave *Li'l Abner* its tone, its unity and—beyond the rather specious satire and fantasy—its fascination."⁹⁷ At this point it is crucial to remember that Capp only married Daisy Mae and Abner in submission to public pressure, and he gladly would have kept Abner a virgin forever. Readers of *Li'l Abner* were not just hanging on to Daisy Mae's aggressive pursuit of Abner, but also to his rejection of sexuality. They kept up with this storyline because they were never sure that they would receive closure on it. And, as Phelps points out, they would have been fully aware that they were being "teased." Abner's inability to consummate his relationship with Daisy, and therefore to transition completely into adulthood, for the first two decades of the strip's run is central to the kind of man he represented and the kind of hero he was: flawed, fragmented, fearful, and—above all—adamantly childlike.

Capp pushed this idea even further in the dailies documenting the wedding and honeymoon, and it suggests a certain defiance and stubbornness in Abner's quest to maintain his own innocence. In the same essay, Phelps writes:

⁹⁷ Donald Phelps, "Over the Cliff," 1969, in *Arguing Comics: Literary Masters on a Popular Medium*, ed. Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 134.

Immediately, on the honeymoon, Abner was entrusted by Mammy Yokum with an enormous phallus-shaped ham—the Family Ham....Li'l Abner's solicitude for this monstrous, vaguely animate talisman, come between him and his bride in every respect including, of course, the most agonizing.⁹⁸

Even here, the tease over Daisy Mae and Abner's union continues, and he remains in denial about what his life will become. These dailies see Abner leaving Daisy Mae alone with the ham, truly having convinced himself the ham is a proper substitute for his presence [Figure 37]. Phelps's description of the Yokum ham as being a "monstrous, vaguely animate talisman" does some work to imply an actual separation between Abner and his sexuality, and in leaving the ham with Daisy he abandons (or at least delays) the responsibility of finally having to sleep with her. These dailies suggest that Daisy Mae knows what is supposed to be happening, and just what her new husband is actively avoiding [Figure 38]. She stares listlessly and longingly out the window, hoping Abner will return soon. The difference between the way the two are treating the consummation of their marriage (his crippling fear and deflection against her excitement and subsequent disappointment) only further solidifies the way Capp redefined and twisted male-female relationships in this comic strip. *Li'l Abner* broke every comic strip rule and it was ruthlessly contrarian in nearly every way, but in no way so explicit as to have its strapping and handsome male star suffer from impotence.

But Abner's innocence was not just some dreadful affliction against his private life—it was a character trait that he purposefully and actively maintained. Like a hillbilly Lloyd Dobler, Abner employed optimism as a revolutionary act, to counterbalance the dark world around him. To that end, there was no possible scenario

⁹⁸ Phelps, "Over the Cliff," in *Arguing Comics: Literary Masters*, 135.

in which Abner could have gone to war in 1941. There was quite a bit of criticism surrounding the strip, mostly based in the idea that because the Yokums and the rest of Dogpatch suffered so deeply during the Great Depression, it should only logically follow that Abner would go to war and serve his country.⁹⁹ It would have been Abner's duty as a citizen—specifically a male citizen—to serve. Readers interpreted Abner's abstention from military service as a symbol of inadequacy, as a major character flaw, and as a sign that he did not do enough and could never be enough. As a matter of fact, Al Capp shielded Dogpatch entirely from references to the War. On Independence Day 1942, he wrote in an open letter to his readers:

Perhaps Li'l Abner and his friends, living through these terrible days in a peaceful, happy, free world, will do their part - by thus reminding us that *this* is what we are fighting for - *to have that world again* [emphasis Capp's]. A world where a fella can do pretty much as he pleases as long as he doesn't bother his neighbors - a world where a fella can worship God in his own way - and where the next fella's got the same right - a world where a fella and his gal can look up at the moon just for the foolishness of it - and not because there may be planes up there coming to blast 'em both off the earth - a world where a fella is free to be as wise or as foolish as he pleases - but, mainly - a world where a fella is *free*! The world has disappeared - until we win this war. Perhaps this small section of our daily newspaper can do its part best by helping us to remember that a free world once did exist, and will again!¹⁰⁰

Certainly, this part of the letter serves an immediate purpose to inject some positivity and perspective into an extremely bleak time, but beneath the surface of Capp's uplifting words are a couple of markers that say something about what kind of man Abner was, and how it related to the question of his military service. For starters, Capp establishes that he gave Abner a space in which to serve his country by keeping him

⁹⁹ Edwin T. Arnold, "Abner Unpinned: Al Capp's 'Li'l Abner', 1940-1955," *Appalachian Journal* 24, no. 4 (Summer 1997): 423, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40934902>.

¹⁰⁰ Arnold, "Abner Unpinned," 423.

sheltered, and by keeping readers sheltered, from the harsh realities of war. By doing this, he equates Abner's innocence and simple character with the ultimate masculine sacrifice. By remaining his charming and gullible self, he allows readers a glimpse of the free world that they might be missing. Further down, the phrase, "a world where a fella is free to be as wise or as foolish as he pleases" is quite telling. This statement indicates that Abner's foolishness is a product of his own choosing, and it suggests that perhaps his qualities of self-doubt and inadequacy are a perfectly natural condition of the average American man. Abner never would have wanted to be Daddy Warbucks [Figure 39] —he was simply too pure of heart, and he probably was a bit too dense and naïve to figure out how to be him in the first place. By making Abner the exact opposite of a character like Daddy Warbucks, Capp identified a different kind of male comic strip lead that was just as appealing to and in service of American readers.

Conclusion

Al Capp's unique rendering of men, women, and their relationship to one another makes quite a few statements regarding personal etiquette, family relations and family hierarchies. The men and women of Dogpatch were revolutionary in that they challenged the traditional ways in which they were supposed to behave around each other. *Li'l Abner* made it possible for women in comic strips to have agency in their marriages (both before and during), and to exist independently of their partners. Daisy Mae, Sadie Hawkins, and Mammy Yokum were drawn in direct response to the Blondie Bumstead-type characters, and their caricatured qualities highlight the absurdity and haphazardness of conventional family structures. Certainly, *Li'l Abner* doesn't

necessarily operate in reality; the characters all come from an entirely different realm of existence, and they're full of idiosyncrasies (even more so than the average domestic comic strip of this period). But it is part of *Li'l Abner's* point that these characters exist in a space so foreign that they have the freedom to explore different kinds of relationships and family structures. Al Capp created an environment in which men could be foolish and unstable, in which they could almost drown in their own mediocrity. The men of Dogpatch don't have many outstanding qualities (and they don't exactly have deplorable ones either), nor do they wish to improve themselves. That Abner does not want anything, that he is too naïve to feel as though he lacks for anything, is what makes the strip remarkably rebellious.

Conclusion

"People never forget the first cartoon which broke through their consciousness. My task is to combine the pleasures of yesterday with the expectations of tomorrow and serve it up as the ten-cent black and white special available today. On Sunday, of course, there is color."

—Milton Caniff¹⁰¹

Ultimately, this thesis does not just deal with the way that comic strips taught Americans at midcentury how to live, or how the characters presented in those strips were important to newspaper readers. The sheer volume of people who were reading the comics every day during the period discussed (1930-1960) indicates that readers were attached to the daily presence of these strips and their characters, and in more than just a cursory way. It is difficult to judge the significance of a comic strip the way one would judge that of another work of art. The cultural significance of a comic strip does not derive from an individual work of art (as, in some cases, there would be over 25,000 individual works to discuss), but about the impact that the body of work has over several decades—eight or more, in the case of *Blondie* and *Little Orphan Annie*. Dagwood and Blondie have been engaging in some variation of the same marital misadventures every day since 1930. Annie and Warbucks are currently making extensive cameos in *Dick Tracy* (as of March 2014). Daisy Mae chased Abner for nearly 20 years before they finally married. These are stories that people have followed for years and years.

The impact of these three comics does not necessarily come from what these characters do in each daily strip, but instead what their actions and choices over the years reveal about themselves. It is about who and what the characters come to

¹⁰¹ Milton Caniff, quoted in Jerry Robinson, *The Comics: An Illustrated History of Comic Strip Art* (Toronto: Longman Canada Limited, 1974), 23.

represent in their own universe. The only way that comic strip characters become reliable, the only way that they become people we recognize, is if they eventually become types. These characters cannot change (at least not too drastically) or else they cease to become anyone readers are familiar with. What makes comic strips so different from other serial media, like television for example, is that a concept like character development is so difficult to achieve that it often cannot occur without it happening at the expense of the strip as a whole. They do not necessarily have to become caricatures, and they do not have to have an aversion to growth or evolution (though Daddy Warbucks might). But they do have to become settled and perhaps predictable versions of themselves. The reason comic strips last for so long is that the characters can always be trusted to act a certain way. They become a collection of behaviors, mannerisms, catchphrases, and punch lines. Readers could predict that Dagwood would always try to eat, sleep, and get rich without working. They could also always rely on Annie to regurgitate the advice and demands of Daddy Warbucks almost verbatim. And Abner was always predictably sweet and senseless, because he had to be. And because the characters were this reliable, readers, even decades removed from the early dailies, can imagine a scenario in which young adults in this period would have been rooting for these characters. On a basic level, most of these characters were likeable, even when they shouldn't have been.

And beyond what these characters' actions say about themselves, comic strips also tell us about ourselves. In the case of the three strips discussed here, they tell us who we were during the Depression and World War II. And in the end, many of these characters reveal quite troubling and problematic qualities about what the average

American apparently should have aspired to. These were dark and often dreadful years during which the early episodes of all three strips took place, and it is important that all three of the strips share the common undertones of want (money, a legacy, simple contentment, whatever the case may be). In many ways, George Gallup's findings that readers were more interested in the funny pages than current events is wholly unsurprising—life seemed nicer with the Bumsteeds. It was a nice distraction to follow the adventures of a little red-haired girl and her dog, or take part in a Dogpatch-inspired Sadie Hawkins Day race. The problem is not that American readers were distracting themselves, and none of the critique in this work is to say that a strip like *Blondie* or *Little Orphan Annie* should not be celebrated for its longevity, or that the bitterness in *Li'l Abner's* satire should be taken lightly. The problem, however, is that these strips—no matter how pleasant and copacetic their environments appear—present a much more grim impression of the average American, at least to readers several decades removed. Many of the scholars with whom this thesis engages are writing at a slight distance (perhaps ten years, perhaps twenty) from the period in question, and most of them seem to think that they are seeing something in these strips that readers at the time did not or could not. In these strips, our flaws, and insecurities are either sources for a daily gag or they are underscored further by giving an example their perfect opposites. Only in *Lil Abner* do we see any humanity given to the types of people that *Blondie* and *Annie* ridicule. These strips, in ostensibly giving readers a mirror into their own lives—maybe with a little more color and whimsicality—actually give their raw anxieties a humorous twist. These comics give us an image of who we

are, who we are not (and can never be), and who we should aspire to. And often in these comics, that image is messy, outrageous, and oversimplified.

As mentioned at the end of the first chapter, *Blondie* still runs today, and will celebrate its 84th anniversary in September of 2014. And though after that long, it would seem that we are familiar with Blondie, Dagwood and their two children, there exists a rather large disconnect between who they are and the environment they inhabit. Their world—while still quaint, pleasant, and suburban—has updated to accommodate the 21st century. The humor, the props, even the physical representation of the characters has seemed to evolve slightly over the year to keep up with changing aesthetics and trends; Dagwood still comes across as clownish, but Blondie wears pants now. The Bumsteads now use iPads [Figure 40] and flat-screen TVs (though, curiously they still use a landline). In the last handful of months, *Blondie* dailies have shown Dagwood using Facebook [Figure 41], getting hair treatments (perhaps giving subtle indications towards the aging process, Figure 42), engaging in topical small talk about possible life on Mars [Figure 43], and complaining about the acronym-driven jargon that teenagers use online [Figure 44]. Instead of being the post-war every couple, we are apparently supposed to believe that Dagwood and Blondie are now the every couple for the new millennium.

But there are a few problems with that expectation. And chief among them is that, though their environment may have changed, Blondie and Dagwood have not. And the theme of failure and punishment still underscores the humor of the strip, and there is nothing subtle about it. While the focus of this work as it pertains to *Blondie* has been on the first three decades of the strip's run, it is important to acknowledge that part of

what is so troublesome about *Blondie* and its portrait of the American husband is that their marriage constantly appears as this tragic loop of poor choices and penalty. And seeing the whole picture of the purgatory that is their domestic life involves taking a look at how the strip exists currently. And, again, with the exception of some updates to their surroundings, the strip is more or less the same as it always was. Blondie, though the title character, still exists as little more than a footnote to the family. Though in a handful of dailies in the 1980s she was shown taking a job for the first time, she still mostly exists as a cog in the machine, completely in service to Dagwood and his needs. She exhibits a mastery of cooking, and not much more. She still has no knowledge or control over the family's finances (which, by the look of the February 1, 2014 daily, appear in dire straits, Figure 45). And her daughter, with teenage coquettishness indicated as her primary quality, is little more than younger facsimile of Blondie herself. Dagwood, unsurprisingly, is still lazy, still perpetually hungry, and still enamored of the idea of a quick and painless fortune—verging on a gambling addiction, according to a January 2014 daily [Figure 46]. The meta punch line here was that a strip called *Blondie* is actually about the failures and incompetence of the title character's mediocre and irresponsible husband.

With only a 20-paper circulation, *Little Orphan Annie* closed quietly in 2010, amounting to a run of 86 years. However, the principal characters (Annie, Warbucks, Punjab, and the Asp) made an appearance over a weekend sequence of *Dick Tracy* in June 2013 [Figure 47], participating in a storyline in which Annie is missing and Daddy Warbucks may or may not be in charge of a dubious operation called Project Lazarus. *Dick Tracy* was probably the closest in tone to *Little Orphan Annie* in that it was simply

dripping in its creator Chester Gould's conservative politics (it should not come as a surprise that the Chicago Tribune Syndicate distributed both of them). True to the tone of vintage *Little Orphan Annie*, these two episodes make use of sparse but pointed buzzwords and clues. More than once, the Asp and Punjab refer to Daddy Warbucks as "Master" (and the Orientalist renderings of these two characters look even more out of place in 2013 than they did in 1945). Furthermore, the first episode indicates that Dick Tracy and Warbucks are on such good terms that they have each other's personal phone number, which speaks to that exclusive, elevated camaraderie among the successful few that was discussed in the second chapter. Daddy Warbucks never appeared to have many friends (because only people like him could ever understand him, and there are not many like him), but if he were to have a close, enduring friendship, one could easily imagine it would be with none other than the tough, straight-shooting Detective Dick Tracy.

Why does it matter that Annie and her friends appeared in a few episodes of *Dick Tracy*? Aside from the crossover acting as a treat for longtime fans of both strips, it, as with *Blondie*, it points to an effort on the part of the current artists to keep the characters of their own times. Again, the cheat of the comic strip time-space continuum is that the characters do not have to age or change. It fits perfectly with the principles that foreground the strip that Daddy Warbucks should still uphold the same conservative values as he did decades ago. It's not as if anyone would expect Daddy Warbucks to suddenly switch to the other end of the political spectrum, but with the exception of the trendy political anxiety ("genetic engineering," "depleted oil fields", Figure 48), nothing has changed. Warbucks is still in charge, and his actions are still in

service of his fortune and his ego. Elsewhere, we don't know why Annie is missing. But if we are to look at the formula to which the strip adhered from the beginning of pitting Annie against whomever the collective, national enemy was (Nazis, Communists, etc), we might be able to take a guess at who the villain is here. In the end, it matters little who the villain is; it only matters that *Annie* sticks with the same formula that it has since 1924. This crossover illustrates the essence of the strip: infallible characters against unambiguous villains, all of whom exist in a world that is wholly black and white about good and evil. *Little Orphan Annie* might be over, but this cameo appearance shows us that even after the end of its run, the strip still lives the fantasy it started in 1924.

Li'l Abner had a considerably shorter run than the other two strips, ending on November 13, 1977 after 43 years. Al Capp, dealing with his poor health and a fear of *Li'l Abner* wearing out its welcome, chose to end the strip (timely, considering he would die less than two years after the final *Li'l Abner* ran). Like the fates of *Blondie* and *Little Orphan Annie*, *Li'l Abner* was popular enough that it almost certainly could have been taken over by another artist. But Capp did not want *Li'l Abner's* sharp satirical style to turn to lose its edge. He feared that it would become a strip driven by nostalgia instead of fresh ideas. But even though *Li'l Abner* is absent from newspapers today, it is important to acknowledge the legacy that the strip's reinvention of traditional values has had in the history of American comic strips. Without *Li'l Abner*, there would not have been *Pogo* [Figure 49], or, to give a more recent example, *Doonesbury* [Figure 50]. Without the grotesque yet charming portraits of the American South that *Li'l Abner* offered, there may not have been *Beverly Hillbillies*, and there certainly would not have

been any Sadie Hawkins Day. By presenting Abner as a dense but content man who wanted for nothing, the strip was able to highlight the disservice that other strips were doing their male readers. *Li'l Abner* did not present its readers with ambitions that they were supposed to have; the residents of Dogpatch were not consumed with ideas of money, success, status, or heroism. And in presenting with us with a town full of people who didn't want anything, and who were seemingly unfazed by the Depression and the war, readers were able to see a world where they could be humanized for their anxieties instead of ridiculed for them. Abner was easily as incompetent as Dagwood, but the strip did not punish him for it. Abner did not serve in the war, but the strip told us he was no less of a man than Daddy Warbucks.

In addition, the act of positioning Daisy Mae as the driving force of much of the drama for the first two decades of the strip's run was fairly groundbreaking. And it was also a direct response to domestic strips like *Blondie* where the woman (even the alleged star) seemed to be in consistent service to a man. Daisy Mae was the polar opposite of Blondie, and there was differences mostly boiled down to the level of agency each woman had within their own strip. Daisy Mae was not the star of her strip, but she was in charge of a huge storyline for *Li'l Abner*. She controlled the narrative arc—the emotional development of the strip. In delaying closure on whether or not Daisy Mae would ever catch Abner, the strip transformed into a suspense strip, using romance and a female character to guide readers through it. In doing so, *Li'l Abner* repurposes the role traditional female comic strip character and elevates its women beyond the domestic sphere. In filling Dogpatch with powerful women, Al Capp effectively showed us the disservice that comic strips were doing to women.

These three strips, in their own ways, gave American readers a guide to how families should operate—whether commenting on relationships between husbands and wives, or between parents and children. What these strips were really doing was showing readers that success and failure begin with the family. How we fare out the in the world more or less comes down to how we enact our homespun values. What is important is that we remain critical of the way in which these strips used family dynamics to send a particular message, and the ways in which those messages might have affected readers. These strips wanted us to believe that there was a Dagwood, or a Daddy Warbucks, or an Abner in all of us, but what is most important is that readers thought so, too.

Appendix One: Images

Figure 1



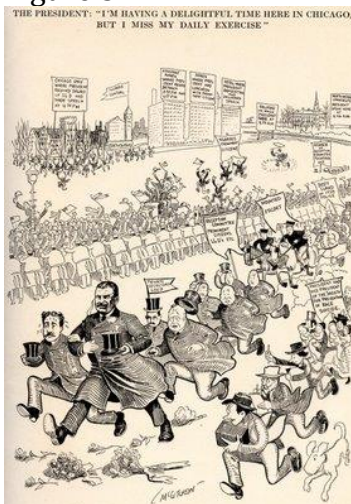
Rudolph Dirks, *The Katzenjammer Kids*, date unknown, King Features Syndicate

Figure 2



Rube Goldberg, *Inventions*, 1914, King Features Syndicate

Figure 3



John T. McCutcheon, "The President" c. 1910, Chicago Tribune Syndicate
<http://arcchicago.blogspot.com/2009/05/opening-reception-tonight-cartoons-of.html>

Figure 4



Charles Kahles, *Billy Bounce*, "Billy Takes the Bunch to the World's Fair," 1904, G.W. Dillingham Co.

Figure 5



Paul Fung, *Dumb Dora* (created by Chic Young), 1932, King Features Syndicate

Figure 6



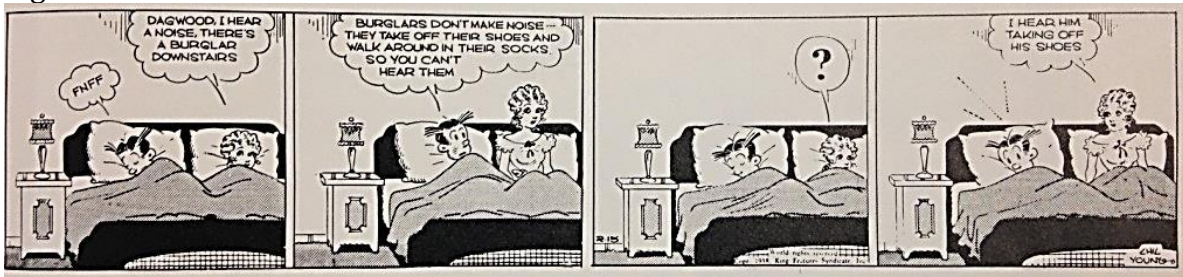
Chic Young, *Blondie*, February 17, 1933, King Features Syndicate

Figure 7



John Marshall and Dean Young, *Blondie*, February 10, 2014, King Features Syndicate

Figure 8



Chic Young, *Blondie*, February 15, 1938, King Features Syndicate

Figure 9



"La fête de l'Ordre des Cocus devant le trône de Sa Majesté, Infidélité"

Figure 10



Chic Young, *Blondie*, February 22, 1954, King Features Syndicate

Figure 11



Chic Young, *Blondie*, February 22, 1941, King Features Syndicate

Figure 12



Chic Young, panels from *Blondie*, May 14, 1950, King Features Syndicate

Figure 13



Chic Young, *Blondie*, March 15, 1963, King Features Syndicate

Figure 14



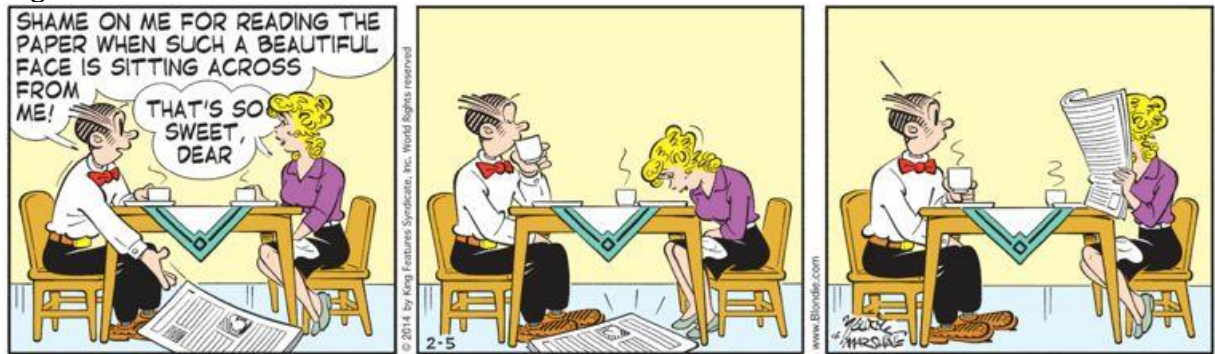
Chic Young, *Blondie*, March 21 1939, King Features Syndicate

Figure 15



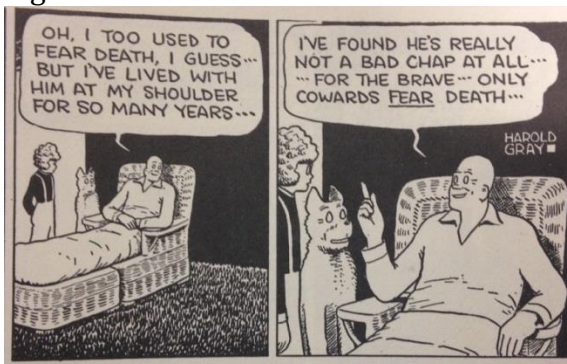
Chic Young, panel from *Blondie*, October 24, 1956, King Features Syndicate

Figure 16



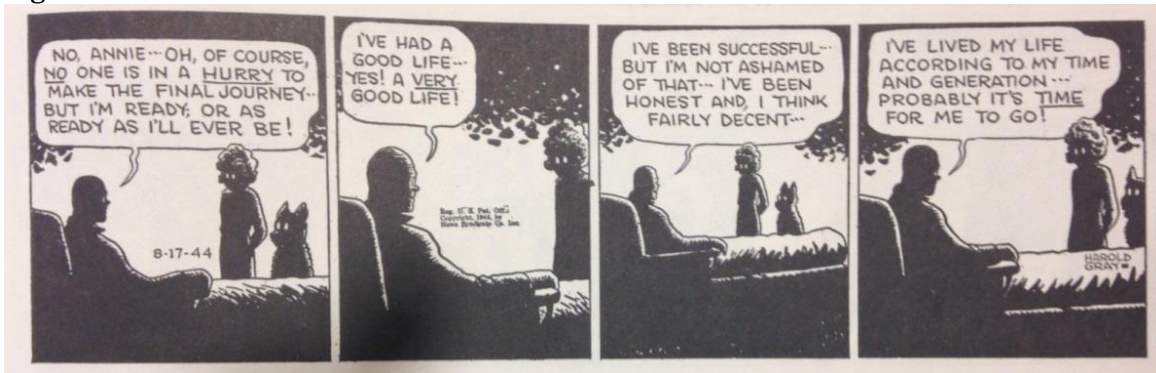
John Marshall and Dean Young, *Blondie*, February 5, 2014, King Features Syndicate

Figure 17



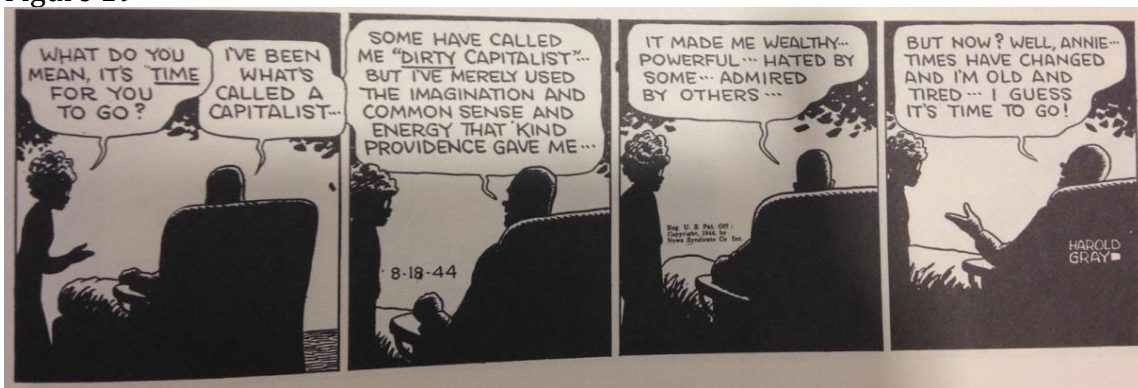
Harold Gray, panels from *Little Orphan Annie*, August 16, 1944, Chicago Tribune Syndicate

Figure 18



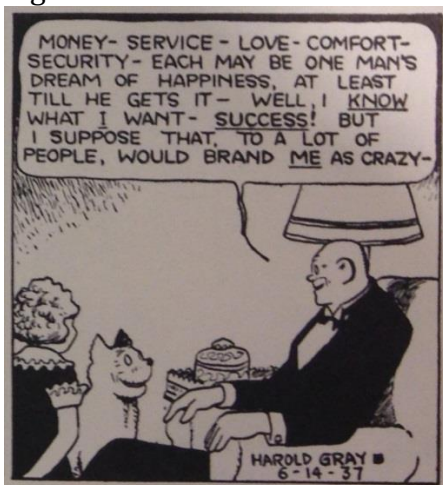
Harold Gray, *Little Orphan Annie*, August 17th, 1944, Chicago Tribune Syndicate

Figure 19



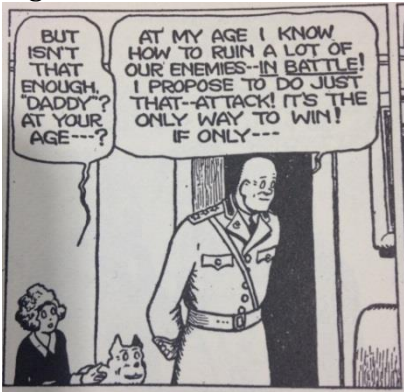
Harold Gray, *Little Orphan Annie*, August 17th, 1944, Chicago Tribune Syndicate

Figure 20



Harold Gray, panel from *Little Orphan Annie*, June 14, 1937, Chicago Tribune Syndicate

Figure 21



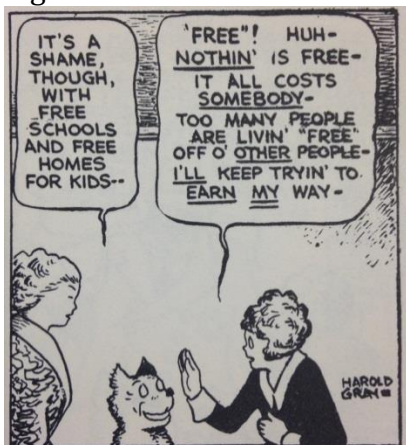
Harold Gray, panel from *Little Orphan Annie*, May 5 1942, Chicago Tribune Syndicate

Figure 22



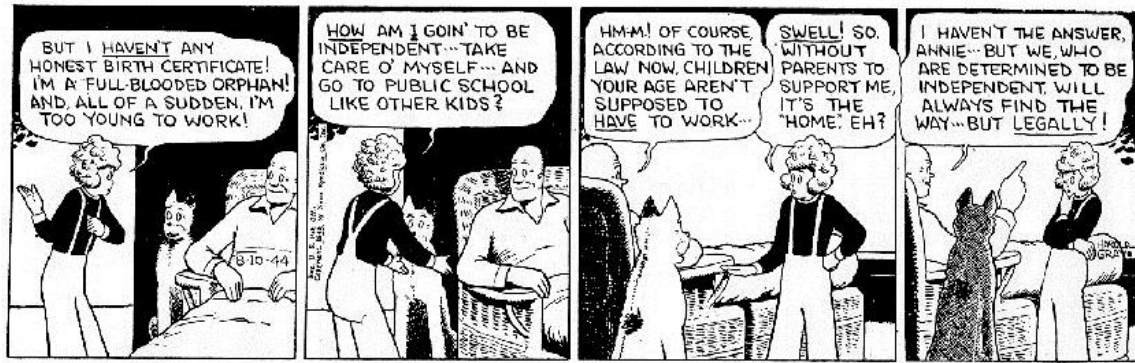
Harold Gray, panel from *Little Orphan Annie*, September 27, 1924, Chicago Tribune Syndicate

Figure 23



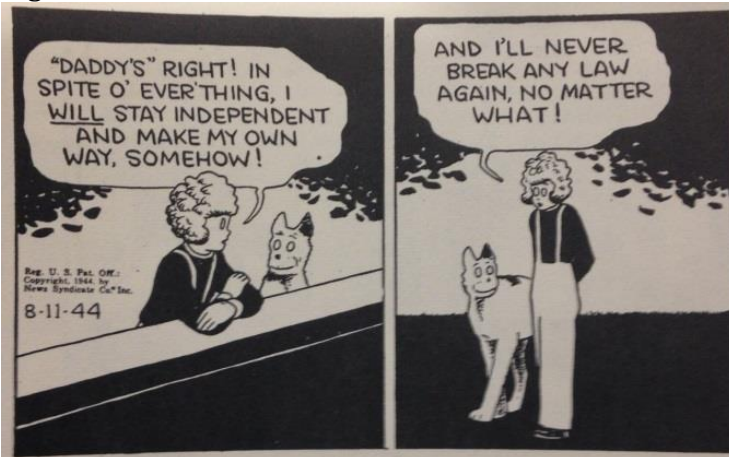
Harold Gray, panel from *Little Orphan Annie*, November 8, 1935, Chicago Tribune Syndicate

Figure 24



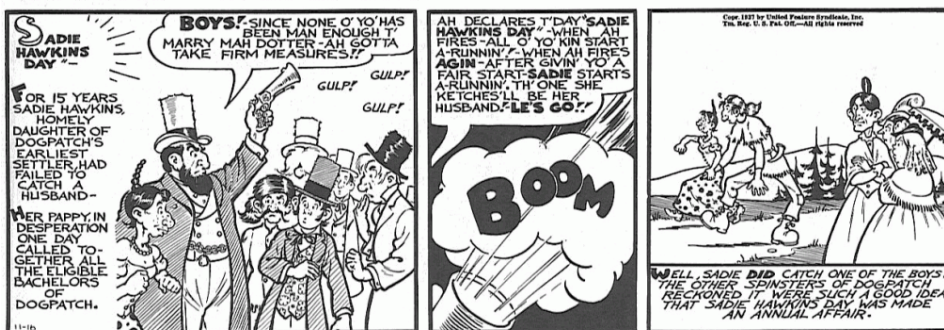
Harold Gray, *Little Orphan Annie*, August 10, 1944, Chicago Tribune Syndicate

Figure 25



Harold Gray, *Little Orphan Annie*, August 11, 1944 Chicago Tribune Syndicate

Figure 26



Al Capp, *Li'l Abner*, November 16, 1937, United Features Syndicate.

Figure 27



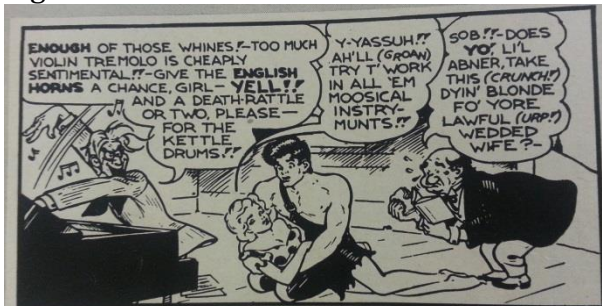
Al Capp, panel from *Li'l Abner*, November 19, 1949, United Features Syndicate

Figure 28



Al Capp, panel from *Li'l Abner*, c. 1935, United Features Syndicate

Figure 29



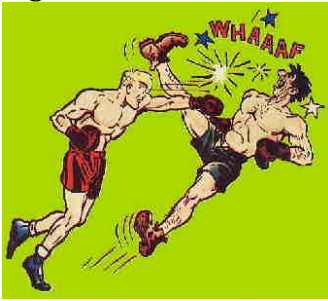
Al Capp, panel from *Li'l Abner*, c. 1945, United Features Syndicate

Figure 30



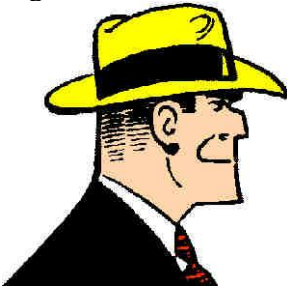
Al Capp, panel from *Li'l Abner*, March 1952, United Features Syndicate

Figure 31



Ham Fisher, *Joe Palooka* specialty art, c. 1930, McNaught Syndicate

Figure 32



Chester Gould, *Dick Tracy* specialty art, c. 1930, Tribune Media Services

Figure 33



Dale Messick, *Brenda Starr* specialty art, c. 1940, Chicago Tribune Syndicate

Figure 34



Al Capp, *Li'l Abner* specialty art, c. 1954, United Features Syndicate

Figure 35



Al Capp, panel from *Li'l Abner*, March 29, 1952, United Features Syndicate.

Figure 36



Al Capp, panel from *Li'l Abner*, c. 1940, United Features Syndicate

Figure 37



Al Capp, panel from *Lil Abner*, April 15, 1952, United Features Syndicate

Figure 38



Al Capp, panel from *Li'l Abner*, c. April 1952, United Features Syndicate

Figure 39



Tex Blaisdell and Elliott Caplin, panel from *Little Orphan Annie*, May 24 1969, Chicago Tribune Syndicate

Figure 40



John Marshall and Dean Young, *Blondie*, February 22, 2014, King Features Syndicate

Figure 41



John Marshall and Dean Young, *Blondie*, October 19, 2013, King Features Syndicate

Figure 42



John Marshall and Dean Young, *Blondie*, September 29, 2013, King Features Syndicate

Figure 43



John Marshall and Dean Young, *Blondie*, August 24, 2013, King Features Syndicate

Figure 44



John Marshall and Dean Young, *Blondie*, November 13, 2013, King Features Syndicate

Figure 45



John Marshall and Dean Young, *Blondie*, February 1, 2014, King Features Syndicate

Figure 46



John Marshall and Dean Young, *Blondie*, January 13, 2014, King Features Syndicate

Figure 47



Mike Curtis and Joe Staton, *Dick Tracy*, June 15, 2013, Tribune Media Services

Figure 48



Mike Curtis and Joe Staton, *Dick Tracy*, June 16, 2013, Tribune Media Services

Figure 49



Walt Kelly, *Pogo*, March 8, 1964, Post-Hall Syndicate

Figure 50



Gary Trudeau, *Doonesbury*, January 27, 2007, Universal Press Syndicate

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