

**Animals as People and People as Animals: Analyzing Animal Rights
Messaging through Patrick McDonnell's *MUTTS***

A Thesis submitted for Albion College Honors

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Introduction:

This Honors thesis analyzes the substance, rhetoric, and reception of Patrick McDonnell's comic strip *MUTTS* to determine its methods of conveying animal rights messaging to a wider audience. Specifically, this thesis focuses on McDonnell's usage of anthropomorphism and framing of the emotions of animals to persuade viewers of the dignity and autonomy of animals and their worthiness of receiving humane treatment. McDonnell's techniques are also compared to previous animal rights artists to understand how *MUTTS'* core message resembles or differs from their previous works of art. Additionally, *MUTTS'* methods of using anthropomorphism are compared to other newspaper comics to determine its exact purpose in conveying the comic's message. Finally, this textual analysis is accompanied by a visual analysis of selected *MUTTS* strips to illustrate how McDonnell's techniques and messaging are put into practice within the comic.

Historically, there is a popular conception that art can be divided into “low art” and “high art,” with “low art” denoting works that carry little or no artistic merit and “high art” denoting works that carry profound meaning. Oftentimes, the divide between “low” and “high” art is based on the medium used; older and more traditional mediums such as painting and sculpture, for example, are often thought of as being inherently “better” than modern mediums such as animation and comics that are thought of as being “unsophisticated” and “childish.”¹ Despite the fact that these contemporary attitudes on art originated from eighteenth and nineteenth-century European culture, the tendency to attempt to “rank” art has been observed in a wide range of cultures throughout history,

¹ Joshua Abraham Kopin, “Funnies,” In *Keywords for Comics Studies*, edited by Ramzi Fawaz, Shelley Streeby, and Deborah Elizabeth Whaley (NYU Press, 2021), 108.

suggesting that art hierarchies are less culturally based than socially based.² Traditionally, the label of “low art” has been applied to works of art that are either multimedia, from a medium that is relatively accessible to the general public, or created to appeal to a wider variety of people.³ Seeing this, it can be argued that “low art” is not *actually* inferior to “high art;” rather, the ruling elite in various societies have deemed that they are to differentiate themselves from the masses. Despite this, however, it still remains that “low art” continues to receive less artistic consideration among the general public.

Comics have perhaps a dubious reputation as an art form among the American public, as many trivialize and associate the medium with the “Sunday funnies” (or the “funny pages”), a newspaper section filled exclusively with comic strips. Due to newspaper syndicates not wanting these comics to alienate or offend any readers (since these readers might then cancel their newspaper subscription), this section is often composed of “family strips” that are designed to appease newspaper syndicates; however, this appeasement often results in the strips appearing bland to readers looking for something more visionary.⁴ Additionally, “family strips” are often cyclical in nature, with their stories and characters rarely ever changing, creating a static environment in which nothing ever *really* changes and everybody is always happy. Some of the funny pages’ more critical detractors hypothesize that this stagnance is intentional, arguing that as time goes on and America experiences more and more change, the funny pages serve as a reassurance to anxious readers that American society will remain stable at its core despite

² John A. Fisher, “High Art Versus Low Art,” in Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes eds., *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics* (London: Routledge, 2013), 473-484; 474-475.

³ Fisher, “High Art Versus Low Art,” 479.

⁴ Albert Boime and M. Thomas Inge, “The Comic Stripped and Ash Canned: A Review Essay,” In *Comic Art in Museums*, edited by Kim A. Munson (University Press of Mississippi, 2020), 124-125.

these changes.⁵ Whatever the purpose of the funny pages is, one must agree that a great deal of our modern conception of “comics” comes from our perceptions of newspaper comics.

This perception that newspaper comics (and comics in general) are juvenile and “low art,” however, is inaccurate. The medium of a work of art does not automatically determine its artistic integrity, and there exist thousands, perhaps even millions, of comics that carry profound meaning; for example, in contrast to the “clean” funny pages, underground comics routinely depict material deemed “shocking” and “offensive” to modern sensibilities to ask why this material is considered taboo in the first place.⁶ Additionally, “comics” in American culture as we know it today have their origins in social critique and political satire, with artists like Thomas Nast popularizing the medium through his scathing cartoons on the Tammany Hall scandal in 1871.⁷ These instances serve more as proof that the medium of comics *itself* is capable of conveying complex concepts and messages rather than the capability of newspaper comics as we know them today; however, that does not mean that the comics of the funny pages are devoid of any deeper meaning. In fact, many comics on the funny pages actually use this misconception as a rhetorical device; by contrasting the supposed juvenile nature of the funny pages’ artistic styles (with its talking animals and colorful scenery) with the weight of the topics often discussed, newspaper comics often illuminate aspects of American society and ask their audiences to consider whether changes should be made to society. *MUTTS*, a comic

⁵ Boime and Inge, “The Comic Stripped and Ash Canned: A Review Essay,” In *Comic Art in Museums*, 128-129.

⁶ Boime and Inge, “The Comic Stripped and Ash Canned: A Review Essay,” In *Comic Art in Museums*, 128-129.

⁷ Fiona Deans Halloran, *Thomas Nast : The Father of Modern Political Cartoons* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 133.

strip by cartoonist Patrick McDonnell that has been running since 1994, is perhaps the quintessential example of this.

On the surface level, *MUTTS* appears to be a comic strip about two animals and the world around them. Earl the dog and Mooch the cat do things that members of their species would do in real life, like go on walks, play with balls of yarn, and spend time with their owners. Earl and Mooch also meet with a variety of other animals, including Guard Dog (a gentle giant with a chain attached to his collar), Bip and Bop (two squirrels that love to ambush others with a hail of acorns), and Crabby (an aptly-named ill-tempered crab). While these characters and their actions sound purely comical, and while *MUTTS* is intended to be a humorous strip, it is also intended to be thought-provoking. The silly and mundane actions of Earl and Mooch's group for example, provide both comic relief and humanize the animals in the eyes of the viewer; when Earl reacts to being forced to wear a sweater, hat, and boots out on a walk (but no pants), the viewer might chuckle and see Earl not as just a dog, but an individual with thoughts and opinions independent of humans.⁸ Additionally, the cartoonish nature of the strip, with its bright colors, over-exaggerated facial and body features, and light dialogue, is often juxtaposed with serious subject matters; during the strip's annual "Shelter Stories"⁹ series and others like it, topics like the inhumane treatment of animals are front and center, and through strips like these the viewer is asked to assess their opinions towards animals and animal rights. These aspects of *MUTTS* underline the gravity of the comic's central message, which is that animals are deserving of rights and respect and that humans must treat them humanely.

⁸ Appendix A.

⁹ Patrick McDonnell, *Best of Mutts* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster USA, 2007), 91.

Questions:

Given that *MUTTS* pivots around discussions of animal rights, it is important to recognize that Patrick McDonnell did not invent the modern conception of “animal rights,” nor was he the first person to popularize it. The concept of animals being more than unthinking and unfeeling beasts is as old as human history, with examples of artists depicting animals as fully sentient beings existing as far back as the 7th century BCE in ancient Assyria.¹⁰ Later instances of ideas akin to the concept of “animal rights” can be found throughout history, from the Roman, Phoenician-born philosopher Porphyry’s treatise on vegetarianism in the 3rd century CE¹¹ to French Romantic painter Théodore Géricault’s depictions of the suffering of horses in the 19th century,¹² humans have always been examining their relationships to animals. However, the mainstream perception of the role of animals in the world has changed a great deal over time. Whereas ancient thinkers such as Aristotle mainly posited that animals were devoid of souls and rationality (and that therefore humans have no special obligations to treat them humanely),¹³ this perspective became less popular over time as “animal welfarism,” or the belief that excessive cruelty to animals was unwarranted, gained traction. Some welfarists like William Hogarth argued that abusing animals harmed both animals *and* humans,¹⁴ while others like bioethicist and moral philosopher Peter Singer claim that while animals *could* be exploited for human gain, this exploitation must be justifiable and not meaningless.¹⁵ However, today the concept of “animal rights” has typically been

¹⁰ Stephen F. Eisenman, *The Cry of Nature: Art and the Making of Animal Rights* (London: Reaktion Books, 2013), 51-53.

¹¹ Eisenman, *The Cry of Nature: Art and the Making of Animal Rights*, 48-49.

¹² Eisenman, *The Cry of Nature: Art and the Making of Animal Rights*, 148-157.

¹³ Eisenman, *The Cry of Nature: Art and the Making of Animal Rights*, 49-51.

¹⁴ Eisenman, *The Cry of Nature: Art and the Making of Animal Rights*, 96-103.

¹⁵ Eisenman, *The Cry of Nature: Art and the Making of Animal Rights*, 105.

associated with the belief that animals are both sentient beings and that they do not exist to be used by humans, and it is this viewpoint that *MUTTS* largely follows.¹⁶

At first glance, *MUTTS* seems to reject pre-contemporary notions on the statuses of animals and their relationships to humans; however, while the idea that animals were mere tools for human usage was certainly *popular* in the past, it was by no means the *only* idea. Just as ancient thinkers like Aristotle argued that humans had the divine right to exploit animals, others like Porphyry argued that animals deserved just treatment from humans and were in fact intelligent beings on their own.¹⁷ This argument seems to line up closely with *MUTTS'* core message, despite the time between them. However, is this similarity out of pure coincidence, or are *MUTTS'* views towards animal rights directly influenced on some level by the beliefs of past and current animal rights advocates? If so, how much of the comic is inspired by them?

Considering the comic itself, additional questions arise as to what other potential influences it has. Its choice of characters, for one, seems to reflect a wider trend in newspaper comics. In *MUTTS*, McDonnell usually voices his concerns on the treatment of animals through the comic's animal characters. These animals, while often behaving as animals normally do, also occasionally act the way that humans do (like, for example, laughing at a dinner party).¹⁸ This anthropomorphism, while helpful in endearing these animals to the reader, is by no means unique to *MUTTS*. Numerous other popular newspaper comics such as *Garfield* and *Calvin and Hobbes* utilize anthropomorphism to allow readers to identify with animal characters, and many of these comics are also centered around these characters. However, many of these comics do not overtly

¹⁶ Eisenman, *The Cry of Nature: Art and the Making of Animal Rights*, 255.

¹⁷ Eisenman, *The Cry of Nature: Art and the Making of Animal Rights*, 48.

¹⁸ Appendix B.

advocate for animal rights in the same way that *MUTTS* does in their strips; while the animals' human-like behaviors *do* allow for their respective creators to discuss human nature through their actions, research must be done to determine whether they are used to discuss human attitudes towards animals in the way that *MUTTS* does. The anthropomorphism in *MUTTS* and other popular newspaper comics must be compared to determine what each comic's objectives are in ascribing human characteristics to animals and what similarities they might share. Additionally, the exact effects of using anthropomorphism must be researched to determine if it is an effective method to promote animal rights in the context of *MUTTS*.

Extensive analysis must also be done to determine what animal rights issues Patrick McDonnell considers most pressing when creating *MUTTS* strips and what these concerns reveal about both him and American society. This analysis will range from a formal analysis of selected *MUTTS* strips to determine the comic's exact message and how this message is conveyed to the reader to an examination of McDonnell's animal rights activism outside of the comic strip to determine what causes he supports and whether these causes are reflected in the comics he creates. Selected strips for analysis will range from the comic's entire lifespan, and changes in the comic throughout the years will be discussed when pertinent to understand how these changes reflect the comic's animal rights messaging. Special attention will also be given to charity from McDonnell explicitly tied to the *MUTTS* brand, such as a *MUTTS* strip that McDonnell created and donated to a charity auction for hurricane relief funds in 2017.¹⁹

¹⁹ Michael Cavna, "'Mutts,' 'Doonesbury' and 'Calvin and Hobbes' Art Leads Auction Bids for Hurricane Relief" (The Washington Post. WP Company, November 27, 2017).

Literature Review:

This section will review past writings on animal rights and its presence in art and the practices of modern newspaper comics to determine the level of influence that past artists have had on the stylistic and rhetorical content of *MUTTS*. Earlier animal rights advocates and their perspectives on the nature of animals and their position relative to humans are discussed, with additional focus going towards the historical context that these opinions arose from. Additionally, multiple newspaper comics that have previously incorporated animals into their strips similar to how *MUTTS* uses anthropomorphism, where animals act out in human-like ways to convey ideas on both human and animal nature, are discussed. These perspectives on animal rights and previous usages of anthropomorphism are then compared to those depicted in *MUTTS* to determine how the comic may break off or hold true to these previous examples and why this might be so.

In *MUTTS*' assertion of the rights of animals, McDonnell often portrays the suffering of animals at human hands and argues that humans do not have the right to inflict this suffering on animals. In doing so, he reflects on past artists' attempts to advocate for "animal rights;" however, the exact methods in which he advocates differ from past examples. Many past animal rights advocates, for example, focused on the human cost of animal cruelty. In eighteenth-century English satirist and printmaker William Hogarth's engraving series *The Four Stages of Cruelty* (1751), animal cruelty is framed as a warning sign for other antisocial behaviors like murder and assault, and the humane treatment of animals is therefore viewed as necessary not because it is cruel to the animals but because it is cruel to humans.²⁰ This perspective of the status of animals, while acknowledging the cruel treatment of animals as being on par with murder,

²⁰ Eisenman, *The Cry of Nature: Art and the Making of Animal Rights*, 96-97.

ultimately continues to place animals below humans by viewing their suffering as secondary to human suffering.

Other past advocates for animal rights were more radical in how they viewed animals; French artist Théodore Géricault, for instance, argued that animals were beings that had the capacity to feel emotions and deserved autonomy from humans.²¹ Under this opinion, the systematic exploitation of animals by humans is inexcusable, as the suffering it inflicts on animals infringes on their freedom. This concept of the status of animals is more aligned with McDonnell's vision; however, how he and Géricault express their opinions through their art differs. Géricault's primary subjects when creating artworks sympathetic to animals were horses, as during his time Europe was undergoing rapid industrialization and new technologies began to make traditional methods of animal exploitation defunct. The inventor James Watt, for example, had calculated years earlier a formula to compare the power of his coal engine to "horsepower" with the hopes of making horses obsolete (and thus to be discarded).²² Géricault seemed to have been primarily concerned with how industrialization would affect animals traditionally exploited for their labor. While McDonnell shows these concerns towards animals as well, the conditions of the world around him are much different than Géricault's.

The exponential growth of the world's population in recent times has dramatically increased the amount of food necessary to support and continue this growth. Commercial food production is now larger in scale than ever before in human history, and foods once considered indulgences (like meat and eggs) are now eaten daily by many Americans. However, this easy access to once-rare foods comes at a price. To satiate consumer

²¹ Eisenman, *The Cry of Nature: Art and the Making of Animal Rights*, 157.

²² Eisenman, *The Cry of Nature: Art and the Making of Animal Rights*, 149-150.

demand, the industrial slaughterhouse industry has streamlined the process of raising and slaughtering animals for human consumption to reap the largest number of animal products for the least amount of money. The slaughterhouse industry primarily operates through Confined Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs), where animals are raised and slaughtered in isolated centers away from public view.²³ Conditions in these factory farms are typically poor, with animals locked into cramped living spaces with no regard for their well-being until their inevitable slaughter.²⁴ In this system, animals are no longer individual beings with emotions and thoughts of their own, but products to process. When animals in factory farms become sick, there is more concern about how their illnesses might affect profits than about their health. For example, when a facility specializing in egg-laying chickens experienced an outbreak of avian influenza in March 2022, 5.3 million birds from the facility were “depopulated;” this “depopulation process” involved shutting off the facility’s ventilation systems and raising the temperature inside above 104 degrees Fahrenheit, effectively suffocating the birds.²⁵

It is acts of cruelty like this that McDonnell critiques in *MUTTS*, as many of his comics decry the conditions that farm animals face as a result of the growing consumer demand for animal products. Artists like McDonnell and Géricault have asserted that industrial society has made conditions for animals worse in some respects; however, earlier artists that witnessed this cruelty borne out of industrialization were unaware that this cruelty would grow exponentially and extend into all aspects of society. Additionally, McDonnell goes one step further in his defense of animal rights by also highlighting the

²³ Elizabeth Cherry, “”The Pig That Therefore I Am”,” *Humanity & Society* 40, no. 1 (02, 2016), 64-85;70-71.

²⁴ MeiMei Fox, “The Humane League Works to Free Factory Farm Animals from Horrid Conditions” (Forbes. Forbes Magazine, January 27, 2023).

²⁵ Tom Cullen, “Five Million Layers Snuffed as Avian Flu Hits” (Storm Lake Times Pilot, March 30, 2022).

dignity of animals that are not typically adjacent to humans. Sea creatures, for instance, are elevated as independent creatures irrespective of their designation as “seafood,” showcasing *MUTTS*’ concept of animal rights applying equally to *all* animals, not just those humans see regularly.²⁶ This showcasing of the suffering of animals alien to humanity highlights how the actions that facilitate the exploitation of animals in modern society now affect animals of all kinds, not only those that are solely raised for human usage.

The inhumane treatment of animals is now a fundamental part of modern society; how one depicts this cruelty, however, varies depending on the artist. Some may attempt to depict this cruelty as realistically as possible through film and photography. In American artist Frederick Wiseman’s 1976 film *Meat*, for example, the conditions that cattle lived in (and died in) in slaughterhouses are displayed in stark detail.²⁷ Viewers watch the lives of these cattle with the knowledge that eventually they will be killed for the sake of humans, knowledge that they had always known before but never had to reckon with. Other activists like English artist Sue Coe depict conditions in these slaughterhouses in mediums such as drawing and painting, focusing less on recreating the conditions of slaughterhouses as realistically as possible and more on the emotions present in them; more specifically, the sheer suffering that animals within this system experience.²⁸ These depictions vividly portray the agony that factory farm animals endure and work to force the public to acknowledge the cost of this system. The willful ignorance of the consumer is fundamental to the modern industrial farming system, as it allows them to not have to think about the animals that suffered to become their food and

²⁶ Appendix C.

²⁷ Eisenman, *The Cry of Nature: Art and the Making of Animal Rights*, 248-250.

²⁸ Cherry, ””The Pig That Therefore I Am”,” 71.

not feel guilty about their decision to participate in this system.²⁹ Animal rights artists often work to eradicate this ignorance by forcing viewers to acknowledge the cruelty that accompanies their meals.

This style of portraying the inhumane treatment of animals, however, is absent from *MUTTS*. While McDonnell does not shy away from implying or displaying the results of animal cruelty, he does not usually display the act of it *or* the humans that do it. The humans that abuse and exploit animals are mentioned, but never directly displayed. All of the human characters in *MUTTS* are “good” humans, ones that respect animals and treat them humanely; consequently, “bad” humans are absent from the strip. When McDonnell depicts Guard Dog’s captivity, he does not display the owner who chained him; when he displays a songbird with their wings clipped, he does not display the human who clipped them.³⁰ These depictions are likely fueled in some part by the comic’s medium. The distribution of newspaper comics is typically done by media companies that own multiple papers; these companies are concerned with profits first and foremost, so in order for them to continue running a comic, it must be profitable. Otherwise, the comic is no longer circulated in their papers; a notable example of this was in September 2022, when the media company Lee Enterprises pulled comic strips such as *MUTTS* from 80 of their daily newspapers.³¹ If a comic does not turn a profit for papers, it will not run.

In order for a comic to be profitable, it must not alienate audiences and appeal to a wide variety of audiences. If *MUTTS* displayed in graphic detail the atrocities committed against animals, newspapers would refuse to run it out of fear of it shocking

²⁹ Teya Brooks Pribac, “Grief at a Distance: Humans Grieving Unknown Animals,” In *Enter the Animal: Cross-Species Perspectives on Grief and Spirituality* (Sydney University Press, 2021), 220.

³⁰ Appendix D.

³¹ Michael Cava, “Is the Print Newspaper Comics Page in Trouble?” (The Washington Post. WP Company, September 24, 2022).

and offending readers, leading to *fewer* people viewing the comic. If McDonnell wants people to see his message in the newspaper, he must play by their rules, and so he keeps the comic relatively tame. This decision to omit acts of animal cruelty might seem like it only “coddles” the audience by not exposing them to the brutality of humanity; however, in a way McDonnell is offering an alternative method to portraying animal cruelty. Rather than focus on the acts of cruelty themselves and trying to shock the audience into acknowledging the suffering of animals, he instead places emphasis on how the animals affected react to them. Extensive detail is given to how these animals lament what they have been through and how humans wronged them, and it is often these animals themselves that recount their experiences.

In *MUTTS*, anthropomorphism is central to the comic’s message. Its assertion that animals deserve better treatment and that they are beings independent of human exploitation is fueled by the human-like words and actions of its animal characters. These animals often verbally, emotionally, and physically react to the suffering of animals sympathetically and decry this suffering as appalling. For example, Earl the dog and Mooth the cat at one point find a fur coat and, after being shocked by its existence, decide to bury it out of respect for the animals that suffered to make the coat.³² In another strip, the pair encounter a manatee while they are adrift at sea and learn how manatees are slowly going extinct due to human activity. After hearing of this, Mooth kisses the manatee to show his compassion towards it.³³ Other examples of anthropomorphic characters in the strip include Shtinky “Jules” Puddin’, a socially conscious cat that is more explicit in his advocating for animal rights, and the previously aforementioned

³² Appendix E.

³³ Appendix F.

Guard Dog. Shtinky behaves in the same manner as activists, often holding signs with animal rights slogans on them on crowded streets and shouting out statements of support.³⁴ Guard Dog, although sometimes relegated to act as a typical guard dog and bark at “intruders,” also anthropomorphizes at points to critique the conditions he lives in, voicing his displeasure with the chain and post he is stuck to and decrying the cruelty of humans.³⁵ In all of these examples, the animal acting out human behaviors is doing so in a manner that critiques human attitudes towards animals and reinforces the comic’s message that animals deserve to be treated better, since if the animals are actively vocalizing their displeasure with the way that they are treated, then how could any compassionate human ignore them? Through these recurring characters and other, more minor characters, *MUTTS* extensively utilizes anthropomorphism as a tool to endear these animals to the reader and condition the reader to sympathize and understand their plight.

Additionally, the kinds of animals that are anthropomorphized speak to Patrick McDonnell’s concerns surrounding animal rights. Traditionally, society divides animals into “good” and “bad” ones when anthropomorphizing them; oftentimes, these divisions are drawn based on the proximity of an animal to humans. Farmyard animals, birds, and household pets might be portrayed more sympathetically than predator animals, as predator animals do not typically interact with humans on a daily basis.³⁶ In *MUTTS*, however, every animal has the capacity to be “good” or “bad;” a bear can either be feared by others for its ferocity³⁷ or consulted on its ability to hibernate,³⁸ and anthropomorphizing them does not change this. McDonnell does not designate some

³⁴ Appendix G.

³⁵ Appendix H.

³⁶ Suzanne Keen, "Fast Tracks to Narrative Empathy: Anthropomorphism and Dehumanization in Graphic Narratives," *Substance* 40, no. 1 (2011), 135-155;137-138.

³⁷ Appendix I.

³⁸ Appendix J.

animals as being “lesser” than others and less deserving of respect; while animals typically closer in proximity to humans (like cats and dogs) are featured more in the strip, they are not considered to be representative of all animals, and their treatment is only a small part of the animal rights movement as a whole.

Anthropomorphism is widely used in other popular American newspaper comics, as well. *Garfield* is perhaps the most well-known example of this; the strip is centered around Garfield the cat, a cynical Monday-hating, lasagna-loving feline that often finds himself at odds with his owner Jon. In *Garfield*, anthropomorphism is selectively enforced; while animals like Garfield and his girlfriend Arlene act like humans, for example, other animals like Jon’s other pet Odie are instead used to reflect popular conceptions of animals (such as dogs being “dumb”) and thus rarely display human characteristics. Moreover, when they *do* display them it is almost always for comedic effect.³⁹ Additionally, while many of the anthropomorphic characters in the strip reflect human behavior, rarely is it done so in a manner that critiques these behaviors and suggests changes to them. Jim Davis, the creator of *Garfield*, seems to have done this intentionally, stating that he has avoided bringing politics and other controversial topics into the strip and that by doing so it has remained popular.⁴⁰ Anthropomorphism in *Garfield* and other newspaper comics like it is often a tool for emotional attachment and humor, not social critique. That is not to say that the anthropomorphism in *MUTTS* is not also used for humorous purposes, but this humor is often balanced with the critique of societal attitudes toward animals.

³⁹ Appendix K.

⁴⁰ University Wire, “Jim Davis Speaks to Design Class about His ‘Garfield’ Comic” (*University Wire*, Feb 19, 2016).

If anything, *MUTTS'* version of anthropomorphism seems to closely mirror Walt Kelly's, who in his comic strip *Pogo* critiqued American society during the 1950s and 1960s through a cast of animal characters. Using these animals, Kelly was able to navigate controversial topics such as consumerism and McCarthyism with a degree of subtlety, as the disarming appearances of the animals allowed him to mask discussions of these topics as only idle talk between animals.⁴¹ Additionally, much like *MUTTS*, *Pogo* initially used anthropomorphism as a tool solely for humor before later utilizing it as a means of social critique.⁴² This phenomenon where syndicated cartoonists begin to engage in intricate social commentary once their comic has been running for multiple years is interesting, but it is most likely due to cartoonists not wanting to isolate any potential readers until they gain a sizable audience. Ultimately, Kelly's anthropomorphism is on many levels similar to McDonnell's, as they both use it as a tool for social commentary; however, the subjects they comment on differ, with Kelly focusing more on human socioeconomic conditions and McDonnell concentrating on the status of animals in modern society.

McDonnell uses *MUTTS* to criticize the conception that humans are “above” animals and that animals exist solely for human manipulation; however, he also uses the comic to raise awareness and funds for various charitable organizations. *MUTTS'* weekly series are perhaps the best examples of this, as they are often in collaboration with animal rights organizations. In September 2001, for instance, McDonnell celebrated the Humane Society of the United States’ “National Farm Animals Awareness Week” by creating a

⁴¹ Kerry D. Soper, *We Go Pogo: Walt Kelly, Politics, and American Satire*, (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 55.

⁴² Soper, *We Go Pogo: Walt Kelly, Politics, and American Satire*, 59.

series where Mooch and Earl visited a farm and talked to the animals living there.⁴³ In it, they get to know the farm animals more in-depth, and the series culminates with Mooch stating he will “go veggie.”⁴⁴ *MUTTS* has regularly partnered with the Humane Society with events like this, including the “Super Shelter Stories” event in 2005, where readers submitted ideas for McDonnell to incorporate into the comic’s “National Animal Shelter Appreciation Week” series in November.⁴⁵ Other collaborations include a recurring series in coordination with the North Shore Animal League, where the organization’s phone number (1-877-BE-MY-PAL) was included alongside strips depicting shelter animals for readers to call.⁴⁶ Clearly, McDonnell is not afraid to use his comic to amplify the efforts of animal rights organizations.

The comic itself is not the only means through which McDonnell engages in activism. The *MUTTS* brand itself has been used to raise support for animal rights organizations through both direct charity and indirect sponsorship. Directly, the brand regularly donates 5% of its profits from its various media properties, including *MUTTS* books and merchandise, to the Humane Society of the United States.⁴⁷ This 5% amount is not set in stone, either; for example, in response to Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria, McDonnell temporarily increased the amount donated to 10% during the month of September 2017 to help with animal rescue efforts in the areas affected by these hurricanes.⁴⁸ Direct donations to these organizations are not the only avenue through which the comic’s brand aids these organizations, however. Indirect sponsorships through

⁴³ McDonnell, *Best of Mutts*, 168.

⁴⁴ Appendix L.

⁴⁵ Mark Hand, "Humane Society of US Assists Shelters with Essay Contest," (*PRweek*, Aug 01, 2005).

⁴⁶ E&P Staff, "'Mutts': New Effort to Save Thousands of Pets," *Editor & Publisher* 133, no. 18, 32. (May 01, 2000), 32.

⁴⁷ Jen Reeder, "'Mutts' Is 25! How the Comic Strip Helped Pet Adoption Go Mainstream" (TODAY.com. TODAY, September 30, 2019).

⁴⁸ Ali Datko, "Every MUTTS Purchase Will Help Animals in Need" (PRWeb, September 28, 2017).

the franchise's website are also common, with notable examples including a collaboration with the group Dogs Deserve Better publicizing "Have a Heart for Chained Dogs Week" in February 2007.⁴⁹ By advertising animal rights organizations on the brand's social media, McDonnell demonstrates that the purpose of *MUTTS*' entire existence (including both the comic and the franchise that has arisen from it) is to advocate for animal rights.

Visual Analysis:

This section incorporates the analysis done thus far on the literature surrounding animal rights in art and newspaper comics and applies them to specific *MUTTS* strips to demonstrate how the concepts discussed earlier in this thesis are depicted in practice. For instance, how McDonnell argues for the dignity and autonomy of *all* animals in *MUTTS* is examined through comic strips depicting the capacity of multiple species of animals to feel joy and despair as a condemnation of their suffering at the hands of humans. The ways in which human beings can alleviate this suffering are also focused upon, with comic strips depicting humans adopting animals and making lifestyle choices that benefit animals being featured in this section. Through an analysis of these select *MUTTS* strips, specific instances of McDonnell's beliefs on animal rights and how he conveys these beliefs are linked to a wider discourse surrounding animal rights and art.

It is considered common sense by many today that humans are on some level superior to animals, and that this "superiority" is eternal. However, this worldview is deeply problematic as it posits that animals are therefore "under" humans and that humans are justified in exploiting them. *MUTTS* explicitly rejects this notion of the inferiority of animals in its strips, and the comic's December 28, 1997 edition is perhaps

⁴⁹ E&P Staff, "'Mutts' Comic and Web Site Are Helping Animals" (Editor and Publisher. Editor and Publisher, February 2, 2007).

the most striking example of this. In the strip, Earl the dog and his owner Ozzie take a winter stroll with a man lamenting the fact that animals do not have the capacity to appreciate human culture; all the while, his speech is juxtaposed with scenes of Earl gazing at natural sources of beauty.⁵⁰ At the end of the strip, after Earl is shown staring at the sun over the horizon, the man laments: “Poor things— just don’t know what they’re missing.” Through its dialogue and depiction of Earl, this strip asserts the dignity of animals and condemns human exceptionalism as being based on ignorance.

Throughout the strip, the man talking to Ozzie continually praises human culture and those that produce it; he extols the “noble poets,” the “great composers,” and the “best artists” for creating magnificent works of art that are delicate and beautiful. At the same time, he claims that animals are unable to appreciate these works of art and the values the art embodies, therefore making them “ignorant.” This idea of animals being lesser than humans, however, conflates comprehension for intelligence; animals have developed different systems of languages independent of humanity, so it would only be natural for them to not comprehend human culture.⁵¹ A painting or poem would hold no meaning to animals not because they lack the capacity to understand beauty, McDonnell argues, but because they lack the comprehension of human language needed to appreciate them. The belief that animals are somehow incapable of possessing thoughts like humans (and are thus lesser), therefore, would be based on prejudice.

The strip additionally makes a conscious effort to assert the dignity of animals through Earl the dog. In the comic, sections of the man’s speech denigrating animals are broken up by instances of Earl gazing at various scenes of nature, and the exact scenes he

⁵⁰ Appendix M.

⁵¹ Eisenman, *The Cry of Nature: Art and the Making of Animal Rights*, 20-26.

is witnessing are meant to correspond with certain parts of the man's speech. For example, immediately after the man states that animals can never "appreciate the delicate melodies of our great composers," Earl is pictured silently staring at a group of songbirds mid-song; similarly, when the man states that animals cannot "grasp the subtle beauty of our best painters," Earl is shown gazing at the horizon, where the sun illuminates the landscape in front of him. In these panels, Earl is still, with his eyes locked onto these sources of beauty, and this attentiveness seemingly refutes the man's claims that the incapability of animals to understand human culture proves their inability to appreciate beauty. Additionally, since Earl at no point during the strip appears to understand the man and what he is saying, one could safely assume that he is not gazing at this beauty to refute the man; his decision to observe nature was in no way influenced by human actions. This fact is essential to understanding McDonnell's views towards animals; not only does he believe them to be beings capable of complex thoughts and emotions, but he believes that these thoughts and emotions do not need to be understood by humans in order to be valid. To McDonnell, animals do not need human "approval" to exist.

In addition to asserting that animals possess dignity, McDonnell takes great care to reinforce their autonomy in *MUTTS* by portraying animals as independent actors within the comic through anthropomorphism. Animals argue, explore, and function just as humans do while at the same time having motivations of their own independent of human desires. *MUTTS'* November 4, 2001 edition exemplifies this perfectly; in the strip, a woman answers her door to find an unnamed dog standing upright on her doorstep expectantly. The dog then leads her into a car with a cat in the passenger seat and then proceeds to drive them all to an animal shelter (likely so that the woman could adopt

them). This scenario, however, is revealed to be the dog's imagination while they are in the shelter, and the dog ends the strip by stating that "if [they] could, [they'd] drive you here [themselves]."⁵² Through the anthropomorphization of this dog, McDonnell posits that animals possess their own motivations and desires and that humans should regard them as independent actors autonomous from humans.

Throughout the comic, the dog acts out in human ways multiple times; they ring the woman's doorbell, they hold open the car door for her, and they drive her to the animal shelter. In all of these instances, the dog is the one taking the initiative in the situation; *they* are the one that prompts the woman to answer her door, *they* are the one to beckon her into the car, and *they* are the one to drive her to the shelter. The entire premise of the strip hinges on the dog's actions, and the anthropomorphism of these actions makes it clear that the dog's desires are on display, not the woman's. If the strip's overall premise remained the same but the dog was no longer anthropomorphic, the woman would have to be responsible for opening the car door and driving to the animal shelter; viewers would then presume that while the dog might have possibly rung the doorbell to get her attention, the decision to go to the shelter would have been hers to make alone. By anthropomorphizing the dog and making them responsible for all of the actions in the strip, McDonnell ensures that the viewer understands that the desires the comic is depicting are exclusively the dog's.

Given that McDonnell anthropomorphizes the dog to have them *act* like a human, it is interesting that, with the exception of the last panel, he does not have them *talk* like a human as well. Throughout the entire encounter with the woman, the dog is completely silent, never verbalizing their thoughts to her and instead having their actions speak for

⁵² Appendix N.

themselves. At first glance, this decision might actually work against McDonnell's efforts to portray animals as possessing autonomy from humans, since the viewer might mistake this silence as subservience and assume that the dog is waiting for the woman to decide to adopt them; however, the last panel's dialogue reveals that this silence is not out of servility but of persistence. In this panel, the dog explicitly states to the viewer that "if [they] could, [they'd] drive you here [themselves]," suggesting both that the events depicted thus far are the dog's desires and that the dog wants to be adopted so much that they would drive a vehicle to a person's house to make it happen, despite having no familiarity with driving prior.⁵³ Seeing how badly they want to be adopted, then, conveys to the viewer that the dog's silence is less waiting for the woman to decide and more refusing to take no for an answer. In the dog's fantasy, they *will* be adopted; no matter how long it takes and no matter if they have to drive to someone's house and take them to the animal shelter themselves. The dog's selective silence reinforces their resolve and communicates to the viewer that much like the dog in the comic, animals have the capacity to have thoughts and desires independently from humans, and that humans should not assume that animals have no desires besides the basic necessities for survival.

McDonnell's views towards animals, however, are not universally shared within American society; many people still regard most animals as unthinking and unfeeling beasts that require human guidance and supervision. Some animals such as cats and dogs are viewed more favorably due to their common statuses as pets, but others such as livestock are viewed simply as disposable tools for human consumption. The cruelty inflicted on these animals, therefore, is often rationalized as being acceptable due to their status. McDonnell explicitly rejects this notion, however, and argues in *MUTTS* that the

⁵³ Appendix N.

exploitation of an animal cannot be justified based on their species. Violating an animal's dignity and autonomy is reprehensible regardless of their species, and in the comic's November 4, 2001 edition, this belief is clearly illustrated through the comic's comparisons of various species of animals. The strip begins with Mooth the cat's owner wishing him "sweet dreams" and contrasts this level of care with the plights of other animals such as pigs, elephants, chickens, and monkeys, and the strip ends with a depiction of Guard Dog wishing to be in the same situation that Mooth was in at the beginning of the comic.⁵⁴ Through the juxtaposition of various species of animals next to each other, McDonnell asks the viewer whether any species "deserves" better treatment than another.

At the beginning of the strip, the viewer is introduced to Mooth's home, where he is cared for by a human and has his own bed to sleep in. To many viewers who own pets, this environment would be familiar; in some cases, they might see themselves and their pet in Mooth and his owner and feel closer to them. Additionally, many viewers might agree with McDonnell in believing that this level of care is appropriate for Mooth and that he *should* be cared for like this. After this panel, however, the viewer is presented with a variety of different animals that live in conditions worse than Mooth. Pigs and chickens confined in factory farms, an elephant chained up in a circus, a monkey caged in a laboratory, and a dog chained to a post outside are all pictured, and in each instance, these animals appear miserable; each animal is either shown with their eyes closed and their heads tilted down or a frown on their face. Through these features, viewers would understand that the situations these animals are facing are obviously worse than Mooth's, and some might therefore feel that their situations should be improved.

⁵⁴ Appendix O.

However, this alone might not convince some viewers that all species of animals are deserving of respect. The mere fact that the animals depicted in the comic appear to be suffering only proves that the animals do not like the situation they are in; it does not prove that they consciously desire better treatment. McDonnell accounts for this, however, and includes suggestions that these animals have wants and needs of their own. In the strip, their dreams are visualized and mostly consistent with one another; with the exception of Guard Dog (who desires to live in a house with his owner and be wished good night), all of the animals dream of running free under what appears to be a full moon.⁵⁵ The dreams of these animals are rendered vividly and clearly, suggesting that they reflect concrete desires rather than mere urges; the animals do not merely want to be free from their suffering, they specifically want to frolic under the moonlight. Despite the fact that some of these animals are not typically kept as pets, they still have the same capacity to understand and resent their suffering as the ones that typically are. If they have the same capacity to hold emotions and desires, then, the disparity between how we treat pets and how we treat other animals is not the result of natural differences in species but of human discrimination. Through these comparisons, McDonnell conveys to his audience that believing in “animal rights” entails believing that *all* animals are deserving of humane treatment regardless of their species.

McDonnell firmly declares in *MUTTS* that all animals are deserving of humane treatment and that the harm that humans routinely inflict on them is unjust; however, he seems to acknowledge in some aspects that his statements alone may not be enough to fundamentally shift the way people view animals. *MUTTS* may be effective in convincing some of its viewers to support animal rights, but other viewers might resist or contest the

⁵⁵ Appendix O.

comic's message out of support for the continued exploitation of animals. People who explicitly benefit from this exploitation, for example, might view *MUTTS'* message as an attack on their lifestyles and react with indignation; someone working in the poultry industry might view the comic as targeting them for simply doing their job, while someone who frequently eats meat might view it as an unjustified attack on their dietary habits. McDonnell counters these critiques, however, by arguing that these people are not bystanders in the exploitation of animals but active participants through their actions and that only by coming to terms with this can they change their ways. This belief is seen in *MUTTS'* June 14, 2020 edition, where Butchie the butcher visits an animal sanctuary and comes face to face with the very animals whose meat he sells in his deli, and after visiting the sanctuary, Butchie is shown overwhelmed by grief as he lays at the counter of his store.⁵⁶ This grief motivates Butchie in the editions following this strip to only sell vegan products at his deli, reflecting how his experiences have changed him for the better.⁵⁷ McDonnell's depiction of Butchie's epiphany and subsequent change in behavior serves as a model to those resistant to *MUTTS'* message by illustrating how to acknowledge the suffering of animals.

For the first half of the strip, Butchie is shown leaning down at eye level and locking eyes with various farm animals. These animals, which include a cow, pig, and chicken, all seem to smile at him; Butchie, by contrast, has his mouth pursed in apparent surprise, perhaps because this might be the first time that he has actually interacted with these animals up close. The animated features of Butchie and the animals are further accentuated by the flush colors of the first half of the strip; the pig's cheeks are rosy, for

⁵⁶ Appendix P.

⁵⁷ Appendix Q.

instance, drawing attention to the upturned edges of their mouth. The banner labeled “Animal Sanctuary” also implies that the animals pictured are well cared for and safe from human exploitation.⁵⁸ If the first half of the strip is brimming with life, however, then the second half of it is marred by death. As Butchie lies on the deli counter consumed by grief, he and the background are rendered in grayscale; by contrast, the animal products in the deli (ones that came from animals like the ones Butchie previously visited) remain in color. The decision to highlight these products in color (thus denoting “life”) instead of in grayscale (thus denoting “death”) despite their existence being reliant on the death or suffering of animals underscores how unnatural McDonnell believes the creation of these products to be. The mass slaughter and exploitation of animals to satiate human appetites to him are unjustifiable, and any attempts to rationalize this system ignore the simple fact that it is built on immense suffering and thus immoral to willingly partake in.

In contrast to his sorrowful disposition in *MUTTS*’ June 14, 2020 edition, in the comic’s June 25, 2020 edition Butchie appears visibly happier than he once was. He stands upright behind his deli counter, with a wide smile on his face as he excitedly announces his decision to only sell vegan products to a customer. However, when the customer asks him what prompted this, he appears to become more serious, remarking that he has “seen the light;” more specifically, he has seen the sparkle in a baby cow’s eyes.⁵⁹ Along with the previous comic, this strip reinforces McDonnell’s argument that animals deserve to be free from systemic human abuse and exploitation by stating that a sensible person would reject this system if they truly understood the harm that it inflicted

⁵⁸ Appendix P.

⁵⁹ Appendix Q.

on animals. Upon seeing the potential victims of this system and realizing how his decisions support it, Butchie's conscience demands that he no longer participate in the mass slaughter of animals and work to avoid harming animals in the future. Ultimately, Butchie's transition to veganism mirrors McDonnell's belief in abstaining from current systems of animal exploitation and conveys to viewers hesitant to acknowledge their impacts on the suffering of animals that it is morally necessary to do so.

Conclusions:

This research intended to determine the influences, stylistic techniques, and subject matters of Patrick McDonnell's *MUTTS* and how they affect the comic's advocacy for animal rights causes. Based on an analysis of previous animal rights art movements, anthropomorphism and its use in American newspaper comics, McDonnell's charitable actions outside of the comic, and the comic itself, it can be concluded that *MUTTS* is somewhat influenced by previous activist artists through its focus on depicting the suffering of animals and using anthropomorphism to highlight their misery to the viewer. However, McDonnell deviates from previous movements by eschewing depicting the specific actions humans engage in to cause this suffering and instead concentrates on depicting how the animals themselves feel about this abuse. These depictions are aided by McDonnell's usage of anthropomorphism, which in addition to providing some humor also allows him to critique society through his animal characters. In addition to critiquing society through *MUTTS* and advocating for change, McDonnell also helps bring about this change through his donations and sponsorships to various organizations concerned with the welfare of animals. These organizations are for the most part concerned with helping animals that are normally considered pets, although McDonnell has also

amplified causes that seek to stop the exploitation of farm animals. This trend is reflected in *MUTTS* itself, where the majority of comic strips focus on “pet” characters like Earl and Mooch; however, this focus does not mean that McDonnell views non-pet animals as “lesser.” Fundamentally, *MUTTS*’ message is that all animals are deserving of humane treatment and that humans should acknowledge and respect this fact.

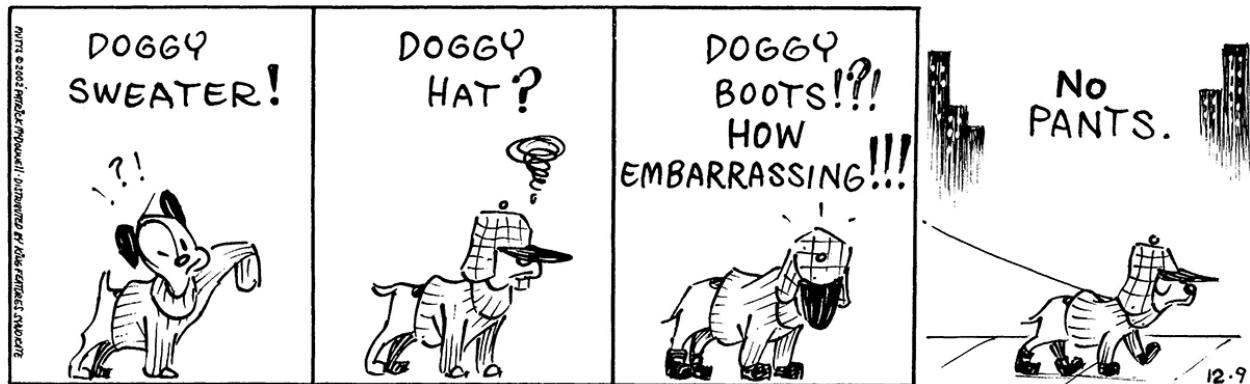
Based on these conclusions, further research is needed to analyze the exact percentage of comic strips that *MUTTS* devotes to specific kinds of animals to see if certain animals have become more (or less) prevalent throughout the comic’s run and why. Additionally, the entire sum of donations that McDonnell (and *MUTTS*) has given thus far to charitable causes should be compared to these percentages to determine whether the comic’s advocacy one hundred percent reflects McDonnell’s personal values. Patrick McDonnell himself should also be interviewed to provide insight into his personal beliefs on animal rights and how he conveys them through *MUTTS*, and his comments should be compared with previous research to determine its accuracy in determining his values and his comic’s intended message. While this research has analyzed McDonnell’s works and advocacy in-depth to discern his beliefs, it cannot stand in for his exact words.

Additionally, much of the research conducted in this thesis concerns the inspiration behind and substance of *MUTTS* and focuses more on the creation of the comic than its reception. The lack of analysis relating to how the comic is received by audiences and its position in American society relative to other newspaper comics means that how McDonnell’s message is viewed by the general public must be studied further. Future research must be done to determine general attitudes towards *MUTTS* in American society and how attitudes towards the comic compare to public opinion towards other

American newspaper comics of similar popularity. However, this research must also be careful to not create a hierarchy of newspaper comics in comparing *MUTTS'* critical reception to that of other comics, lest previous stereotypes on what constitutes "high art" and "low art" be perpetuated. Ultimately, however, this research has illustrated a plausible and credible assessment of McDonnell's animal rights activism through his comic strip *MUTTS* and how it conveys its message through the popular media of newspaper comics. Through comparing the comic's substance and techniques to past instances of animal rights in art and animals in newspaper comics, the ways in which McDonnell deviates from and adheres to them speak to his priorities in *MUTTS*.

Appendices:

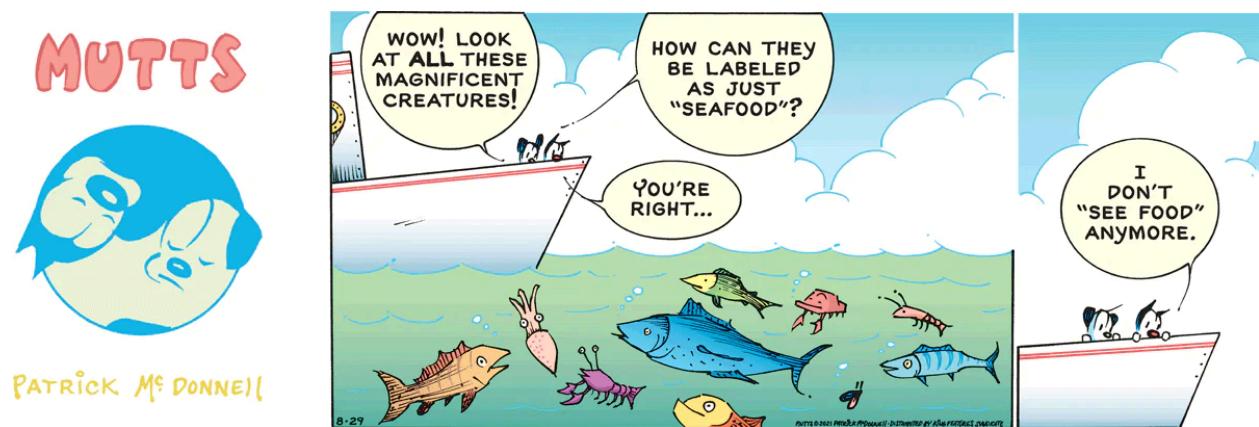
Appendix A: *MUTTS*, December 9, 2002



Appendix B: *MUTTS*, February 4, 1999



Appendix C: *MUTTS*, August 29, 2021



Appendix D: *MUTTS*, September 18, 1997



Appendix E: *MUTTS*, February 14, 1996



Appendix F: *MUTTS*, August 13, 1998



Appendix G: *MUTTS*, August 29, 2008



Appendix H: *MUTTS*, October 18, 2014



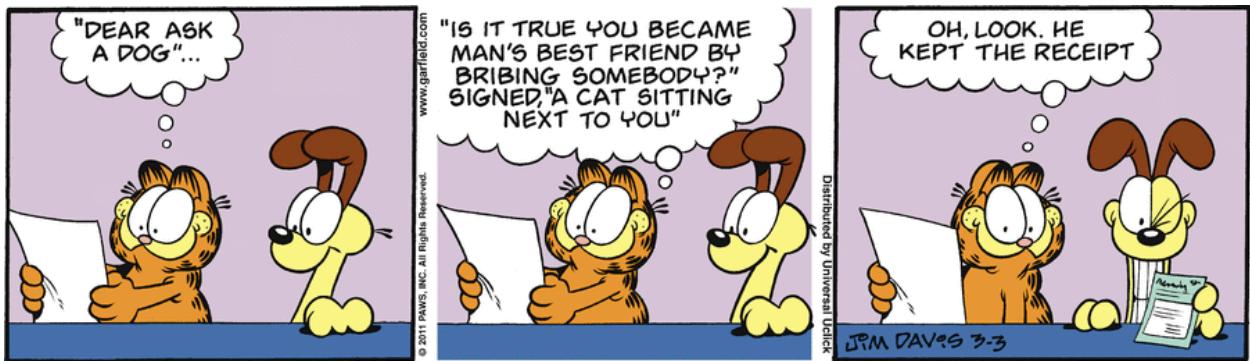
Appendix I: *MUTTS*, September 17, 1995



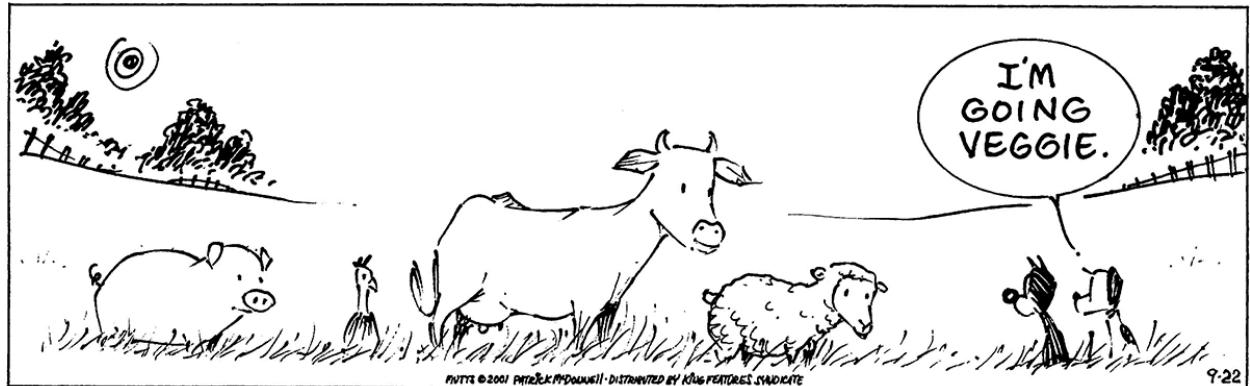
Appendix J: *MUTTS*, January 5, 2006



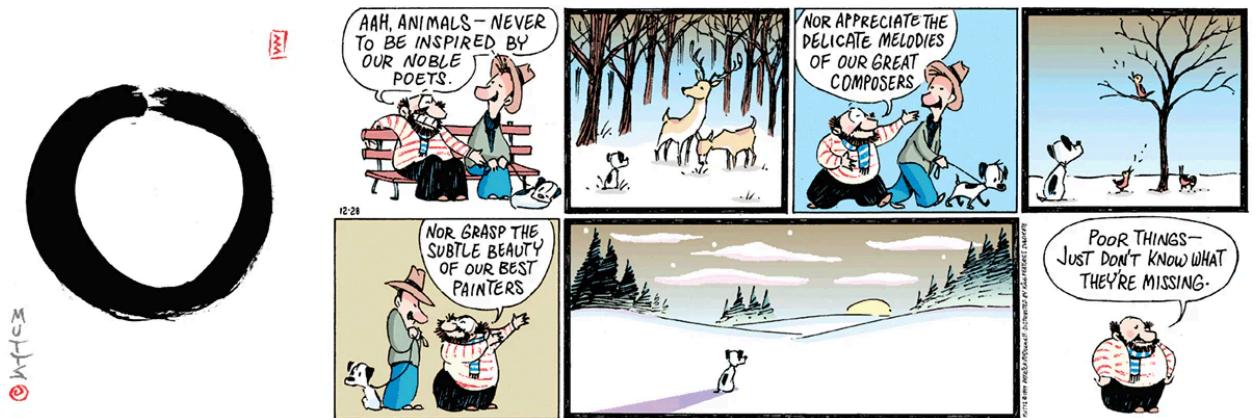
Appendix K: *Garfield*, March 3, 2011



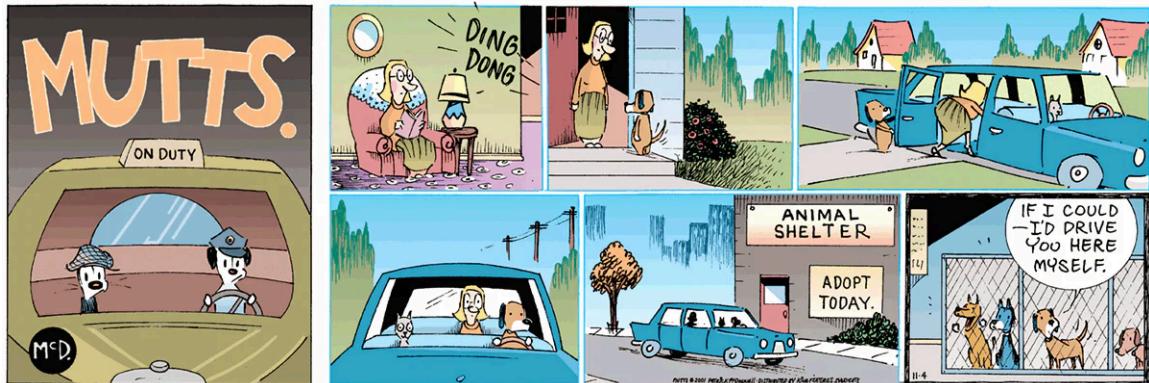
Appendix L: *MUTTS*, September 22, 2001



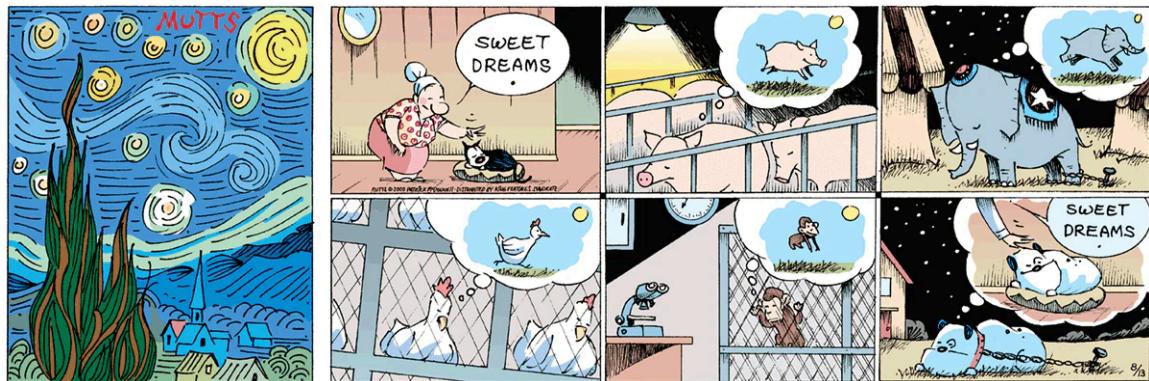
Appendix M: *MUTTS*, December 28, 1997



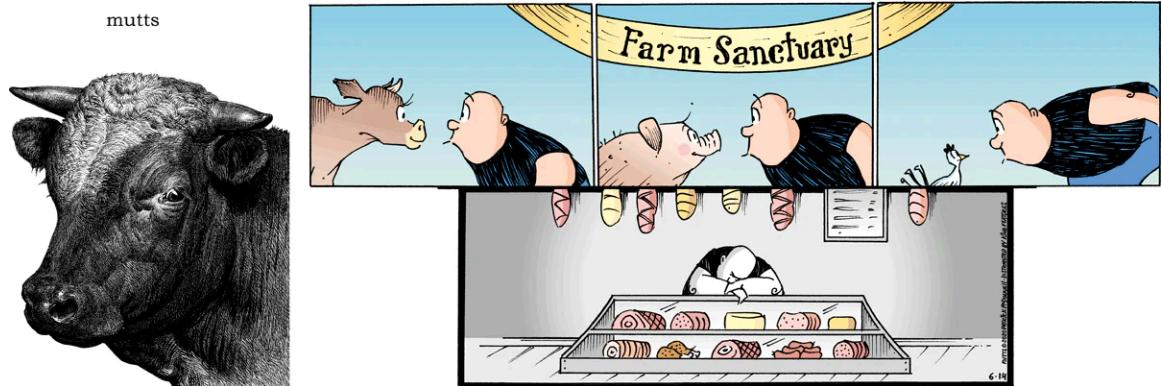
Appendix N: *MUTTS*, November 4, 2001



Appendix O: *MUTTS*, August 13, 2000



Appendix P: *MUTTS*, June 14, 2020



Appendix Q: *MUTTS*, June 25, 2020



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