

Watterson's Art of Humor

Funny situations occur randomly in people's daily lives but when people are asked to be funny, there are times when silence is the only response. Like asking a fish to describe water, humor may be difficult to explain but there are several common traits for what is perceived as humorous. Peter McGraw proposed the benign violation theory, which explains that humor is possible in nonthreatening, unexpected situations (00:02:47-00:04:50). However, the way humor is perceived differs by age. Lyon proposed that there are four stages of humor by age. Children older than three often see humor in "absurd visual[s]" while those over the age of six usually have developed enough linguistic skills to "understand the double meanings", making it possible to comprehend puns (Lyons 5). An adult's sense of humor is therefore the product of the four stages of humor from childhood, and its intermediate form is present in Bill Watterson's comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes*. Watterson generates humor for both the young and adult readers through the use of synaesthetic¹ devices and the manipulation of space within and beyond the panels.

Watterson entertains his youngest readers by playing with a mixture of fonts and symbols producing a synaesthetic effect that enhances a strip's humor. Throughout the series, the plot of Calvin fighting villainized food is packed with onomatopoeia to provide auditory input. In a Sunday strip on May 6, 1990, Calvin triggers a battle with the stinky "toad stroganoff" by poking it, then engages in a utensil fight— "clink, clink, clink"—and with a deft

¹ Synaesthesia refers to an idea that "unite the different artforms" to "somehow unite the senses" (McCloud 123).

slash, flings the stroganoff's knife to the air (fig. 1). Although comics exist in the second dimension, a synaesthetic response is possible because the form of the text enhances its connotation (McCloud 123, 134). In the same strip, Calvin screams "augh" as the stroganoff prepares to strike (fig. 1). The "augh" shown in Times New Roman is different from "**AUGH**", which presents a greater sense of surprise and disgust due to the bolded and larger font.

Symbols, such as the sharp, short lines near Calvin's hand and the food reflect the swiftness of their battle, recreating the static images as dynamic. The additional tactile input along with the auditory and visual inputs increase the realism of Calvin's battle, making the toad stroganoff appear weirder and thus funnier. The visually weird green lump may entertain the youngest readers, but for older readers, the extra sensations complete the humorous experience. The dichotomy of an imaginary battle producing realistic responses is a benign violation against the logical order of the real world, generating humor in mature readers.

To entertain older children and adults, Watterson utilizes closure and a mix of transitions. McCloud describes closure as a reading process that connects the "unconnected moments" using "the space between the panels" (67, 66); however, in the case of Watterson's single panel style, the space exists beyond the panels. In a winter strip, Calvin is climbing up a hill with his sled in order to go down a looped snow-slide (fig. 2). Although there is only a single panel, the next panel exists in the minds of his readers. The border of the panel cuts off a portion of the snow slide, suggesting that the surroundings continue beyond the border (fig. 2). Watterson indirectly established a setting for readers to envision Calvin crashing like usual, even though the scene doesn't physically exist. Without closure, readers will not understand

what is funny because there isn't an apparent violation of anyone getting hurt. This scene is funny because readers use their imagination to see Calvin get hurt—of course in a non-life threatening manner.

The use of various transitions ²is seen in jokes incorporating understand multiple perspectives. In strips with straightforward jokes, the transitions are mainly action-to-action or moment-to-moment (fig. 3, 4, 5), which is suitable for young readers as the visuals easily connect. Other transitions such as scene-to-scene and subject-to-subject are used for jokes with more than one meaning. For example, in a strip from April 26, 1989, Calvin's family attends a wedding (fig. 6). This strip uses subject-to-subject transitions in an hour-glass style, switching from a broad view of Calvin's family to focusing on Calvin and then back to his family. The transition reflects the presence of two jokes –one about the wife-husband relationship and the other about Calvin. The obvious joke comes from Calvin's devious plan to make dad "go into [their] house first" and confront the "starving" Hobbes (fig. 6), which leads readers to envisioning a hungry tiger attacking the dad even though Hobbes is imaginary.

The less obvious joke is the father's boredom and the mother's irritated glance in panel one. Not only is it funny because dad's bored expression contradicts his values about building character, but also because many adults have been in dad's shoes in similar situations. Distance, however, is maintained because the readers see the scene from a bystander's perspective, keeping them safe from the social threat of not fitting in with the occasion. The

² In *Understanding Comics* by Scott McCloud, he explains the different transitions that cartoonists may use in their works (69-72).

seemingly insignificant yawn is humorous for readers who acknowledge that the social threat exists. Young readers will more likely place themselves in Calvin's shoes, thus missing the small side joke.

Although humor is processed differently by various age groups, Watterson's choices in cartooning keeps most entertained. As Watterson has mentioned, "Comics reach an audience of millions, and people from all walks of life", making it a form of media that gives "an incredible amount of access to people's minds" (Watterson, book 1, 17). His work illustrates that humor can be created using the appropriate techniques as well as show that laughter is a timeless component—regardless of the generation, some childhood experiences continue to create laughter.

References:

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- McCloud, Scott. "Understanding comics: The invisible art." *Northampton, Mass* (1993).
- McGraw, Peter. "What Makes Things Funny." *Youtube*, uploaded by TedxTalks, 11 Oct. 2010,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ysSgG5V-R3U>.
- Watterson, Bill. *The Complete Calvin and Hobbes*. Kansas City, Missouri: Andrews McMeel Publishing, LLC, 2012, Vol 1-4.

Appendix:



Figure 1. Toad Stroganoff Cartoon on May 6, 1990, book 1, page 60.



Figure 2. Snow slide on January 13, 1989, page 184 of book 2.



Figure 3. Snowball Catapult on December 29, 1993, page 169 book 4.

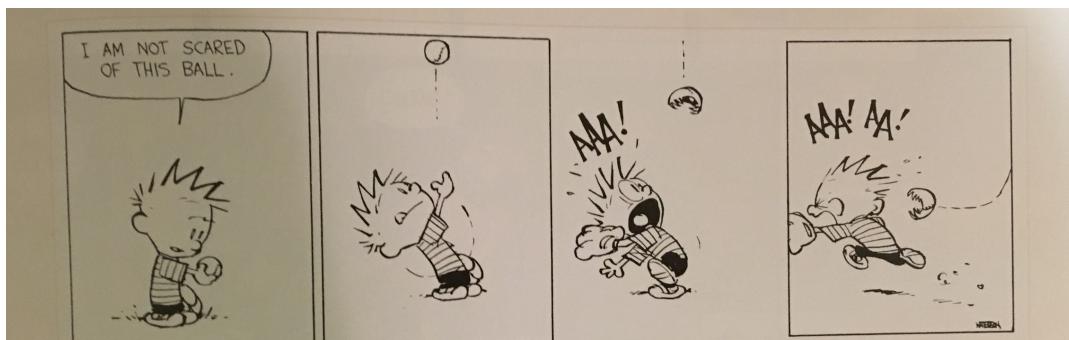


Figure 4. Baseball monster March 14, 1995 page 243 book4.



Figure 5. Angry Calvin Clouds on July 6 1992 book 3.

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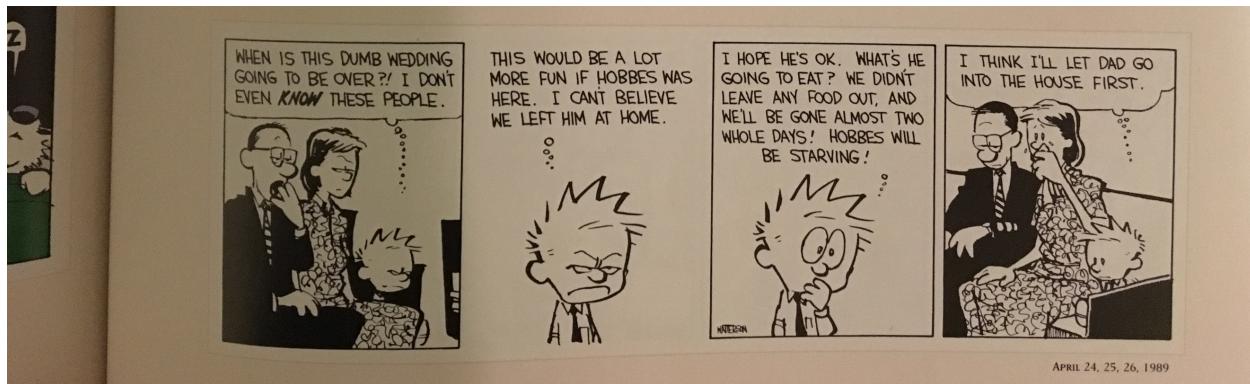


Figure 6. A Dull Wedding and Calvin's Worry on April 26 1989 page 231 book 2.