

The Toy as a Medium of Alter-ego Expression

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Abstract

Toys have an overwhelming significance both for our society and the individual. Being culture specific and gender specific in most cases, such as the famous dolls-within-dolls of Russia and the infamous toy guns now available to boys, toys have great value in individual psychological and overall sociological development. The recent changes in thinking such as the rise of feminism and materialism have led to great changes in toys such as the recent manufacturing of more realistically created Barbie dolls on the one hand and the rise of mechanized toys on the other.

In literature, toys are represented in mostly children's literature and comic strips such as 'Peanuts' and 'Calvin and Hobbes'. Since *Calvin and Hobbes* by Bill Watterson is a recent and popular comic strip this paper confines itself to analyzing the depiction of the toy in this strip which deals with the adventures of and the relationship between Calvin, a five year old boy, and the stuffed toy tiger Hobbes, who seems to embody both the law of the jungle and conventional human wisdom. The analysis of Hobbes also greatly explains why this cartoon has been able to become a valuable mirror to and sculptor of popular postmodern literary culture.

Key words: Toy in literature, Comic strip, American popular literature, Psychological Analysis.

All societies have had toys, affirming a basic human need to connect with an object- perhaps a doll or a ball- in some form of play. As artifacts of popular culture, toys embody the controversies of their time. They also become significant forms of symbolic expression in literature. On the one hand, children's literature abounds in animate toys such as the characters of 'The Adventures of Winnie the Pooh'. On the other hand, they represent the fears of the human subconscious with folk tales abounding in stories of haunted toys especially dolls. For the most part, toys in literature are seen as extensions of their owner's personality, much like the ventriloquist's puppet, and are a mouthpiece for expressing what their owners cannot.

In the comic strip 'Calvin and Hobbes', Hobbes is a stuffed tiger toy which a constant companion to the five year old Calvin. However, Calvin perceives Hobbes as a distinct personality, a live tiger who speaks English and has a very different and rather conventional view

to life when compared to that of the eclectic Calvin's. Hobbes is named after the seventeenth philosopher Thomas Hobbes who believed that man's natural instincts are that of competition, war and destruction but these are kept in check by his greatest desire, that of survival. This view coincides with the vision of the world that is offered by philosophic realism.

The real Hobbes, is the stuffed tiger; the Hobbes that is seemingly alive, Calvin's best friend; is no more than the figment of imagination, what most child psychiatrists would call an imaginary friend, a being, that the child considers existent, but in reality, does not exist. Hobbes may also be a symbolic protective parent to Calvin, especially a replacement for the largely absent father as Hobbes' ironic sense of humor, facial expressions, and point of view tend to closely resemble those of Calvin's father. Moreover, Hobbes is often the voice of reason who tries in vain to temper Calvin's manic impulsiveness.

Another probability, well probable in the realm of literature, is that Hobbes really does exist as an accomplice to Calvin. This theory has illustratable literary antecedents. For instance, Saint-Exupery, in *Le Petit Prince*, sustains that the drawing that appears on the first page of the book is, in reality, a representation of an elephant inside a boa, and that only the incapacity of the adults to comprehend that the most things are invisible, did not allow them to see, things as they are, therefore, making them believe that the drawing was a representation of a sombrero. From a point of view, a little more technically philosophical, this posture could be assimilated to the idealist empiricism of the Archbishop Berkeley, for whom; to be, is to be seen. Things are the ideas we have of them. If they are to exist outside one's mind, it is because there is an infinite mind, that perceives them continually, when no other human does. This mind is of course, God.

The only problem with this theory is that it does not explain why others see Hobbes as an inert and silent creature. Hobbes's true nature is made ambiguous by episodes that seem to attribute real-life consequences to Hobbes's actions of pouncing on Calvin the moment he arrives home from school, an act which always leaves Calvin with bruises that are prominently visible to other characters. In another incident, Hobbes manages to tie Calvin to a chair in such a way that Calvin's father is unable to understand how he could have done it himself.

It is depicted in the first strip of the comic that Calvin captures Hobbes in a "tiger trap". But in several later strips it is clear that Hobbes and Calvin have known each other their whole lives. This is a logical contradiction but it makes complete sense when we view Hobbes as representing Calvin's father or Calvin's conscience. This theory is supported by the observation that Hobbes never calls Calvin by his name. Instead, he simply uses pronouns when speaking to his human counterpart. Also, Hobbes is shown to have a highly creative streak with the need to dabble in various kinds of artistry, a trait which he shares with Calvin, though to a much lesser degree.

Bill Watterson often deals with issues of reality in these comic strips in the form of absurd situation and drawings, and when combined with the sometimes complex language, it becomes clear that the cartoon is working on many different levels. It serves to amuse the younger and more casual readers while offering much food for thought to the more ponderous

audience. The most obvious and frequent example of this is the subjectivity of Hobbes' reality which is, ironically, however never addressed by Calvin himself who never lets up any opportunity to air his philosophical views to both willing (only Hobbes) and unwilling listeners (the other characters). Even then, however, it is not always this simple. As we can see in one strip where Hobbes is dizzy from having been washed and then put in the dryer, the issue of the tiger's reality is sometimes blurred even for Calvin. Another instance of the fluidity of reality and its amalgamation with absurdity is a cartoon in which Calvin imagines that he has traveled to an alien planet and approached by an monster. When the creature reaches up to Calvin, the reader sees that it is really his mother, bringing him his lunch. This undefined reality allows the readers to relate to the strip on any level they chose, and is a major reason for the strip's success.

There are two textual parallels to Hobbes. One is Mr. Bun, Susie's stuffed rabbit, which frequents her "tea parties" as a "guest." Susie is a bit unnerved and put off by Calvin's weirdness. Calvin's relationship with Susie is typical, if somewhat exaggerated behavior, from a six year old boy dealing with a girl. Unlike Hobbes, Mr. Bun is not depicted as being anything other than an inanimate toy and was once described by Hobbes as being 'comatose.' However, considering Hobbes' own dual nature, it may simply be that Calvin and Hobbes do not participate in whatever "reality" Susie constructs for Mr. Bun. This also explains why Susie, in turn, does not perceive Hobbes the same way Calvin does. For instance, in a one week-long series of strips when a large dog steals Hobbes and Calvin dashes around in a panic Susie rescues the motionless feline and serves him tea alongside an equally-motionless Mr. Bun. Hobbes only "comes to life" when Calvin finds him at the tea party. (Interestingly, after Calvin and Hobbes leave, Susie finds that all the cookies are gone implying that Hobbes pocketed them.) Calvin, Susie and school bully Moe are the only children to appear with any frequency in *Calvin and Hobbes*, suggesting that Mr. Bun may well be Susie's only friend. Thus toys represent the sole source of company and comfort to both Calvin and Susie. They also express their ultimate fantasies of self-the wild carefree creature for Calvin and the popular socialite for Susie.

Part of Watterson's genius was to create that voice without a history, and without a past: the voice, in this regard, of a truly American tiger. Yet this was also a voice that, in its understated wit, its eloquence, and its sensitivity to shades of meaning, paradoxically suggested Europe. Not contemporary Europe, but the Europe of Proust and Camus, Joyce and Beckett, Heidegger and Wittgenstein. The Europe that, speaking through Hobbes, could remind Calvin gently that he had misspelled the word "Weltanschauung." But Hobbes, while being an awesomely indulgent and intelligent playmate, was also complex in a different way. As a presence, he both personified and contained the projection outward of a coiled spring rage that -- as kept within the waking dream -- could then rebound on Calvin harmlessly, as he and Hobbes bantered with one another, mocked one another, sometimes even thrashed one another, in the privacy of Calvin's backyard. How big was that rage, though, that potential for violence? In this there was a critical uncertainty, and even a mystery, because Hobbes himself had a night-time side that, apparently on Watterson's whim, could stalk and terrorize Calvin: the side that was captured in Calvin's own description: "homicidal psycho jungle cat".

America in the twenty-first century has been transformed by affluence, transience, more leisure time, and digital revolution, all of which have affected people's relationship with toys. Children's lives have become more structured as family patterns change, creating greater need for planned day-care experiences, and Americans' worship of achievement becomes more pronounced. In an era in which elaborate pre-school, kindergarten, and elementary school graduations ritualize the importance of progress and accomplishment, the average child spends more time with a computer, often at the encouragement of parents who hope to instill occupational skills, than with a bicycle, the traditional symbol of childhood independence away from home with the neighborhood gang. They are also more likely to be engaged in solitary activities than they were a century ago, with toys frequently filling the bill. In a postmodern world of rapid technological change, children and adults often share the same toys and play patterns. They immerse themselves in games and use their toys for conspicuous consumption and to assert status. Thus, while toys fulfill many of the same functions they always have, the landscape of play has changed in sync with the culture.

In the twenty-first century, just as words remain the languages of adults, toys remain the language of children. Through toys, children express who they are; they construct an identity of their current and future selves. In traditional play, children could be masters of their own fates, learning to control their roles in life. However, digital play creates a sensation of the randomness of life. One cannot control the outcome in a computer game in the same way one can when playing with traditional toys. This calls for a new skill: adaptation. Thus, while classic toys- which developed in the Industrial Age- taught control and creation, electronic toys- emblematic of the Information Age- teach adaptation. Intrinsic to technological change is an overload of information easily accessible in a digital society.

However, this magnitude of information requires another kind of adaptation: the ability to collect, order, and organize. The toy collecting trend, attributable today to both children and adults, reflects this mindset. Schoolchildren learn that he or she who has the most valuable *Pokemon* cards has the greatest status on the playground, and adults, like their children, exhibit the need to acquire items that are perceived to be in limited supply and "have them all." These behaviors demonstrate another response to the modern age: adaptation through ordering and collecting, making sense of the barrage of messages and images by identifying objects that provide familiarity and comfort and acquiring, classifying, and arranging them. In the process, a collector identifies with his or her desired objects; thus, part of oneself is what one collects.

In modern society, many forms of play and toys co-exist, reflecting diverse value systems and often cultural conflicts. Play has become as important as work, as people are as likely to define themselves through their leisure activities and their toys as through their livelihoods. This lifelong process begins in childhood, teaching important lessons and skills. In 1996, Pixar Pictures released the first fully computer-animated feature-length film, the immensely popular *Toy Story*, which tells the story of a classic cowboy doll named Woody who risks being displaced by a space-age action figure, Buzz Lightyear. Woody eventually learns to adapt to the change in the playroom, befriending Buzz, realizing that anything can be forgotten and phased out, but ultimately enjoying himself and his place. This scenario belies the role of toys in our

culture. Toys enable us to construct who we are, appreciate our personal and collective pasts, prepare for the future in a world of constant flux, and live for the moment, having fun.

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