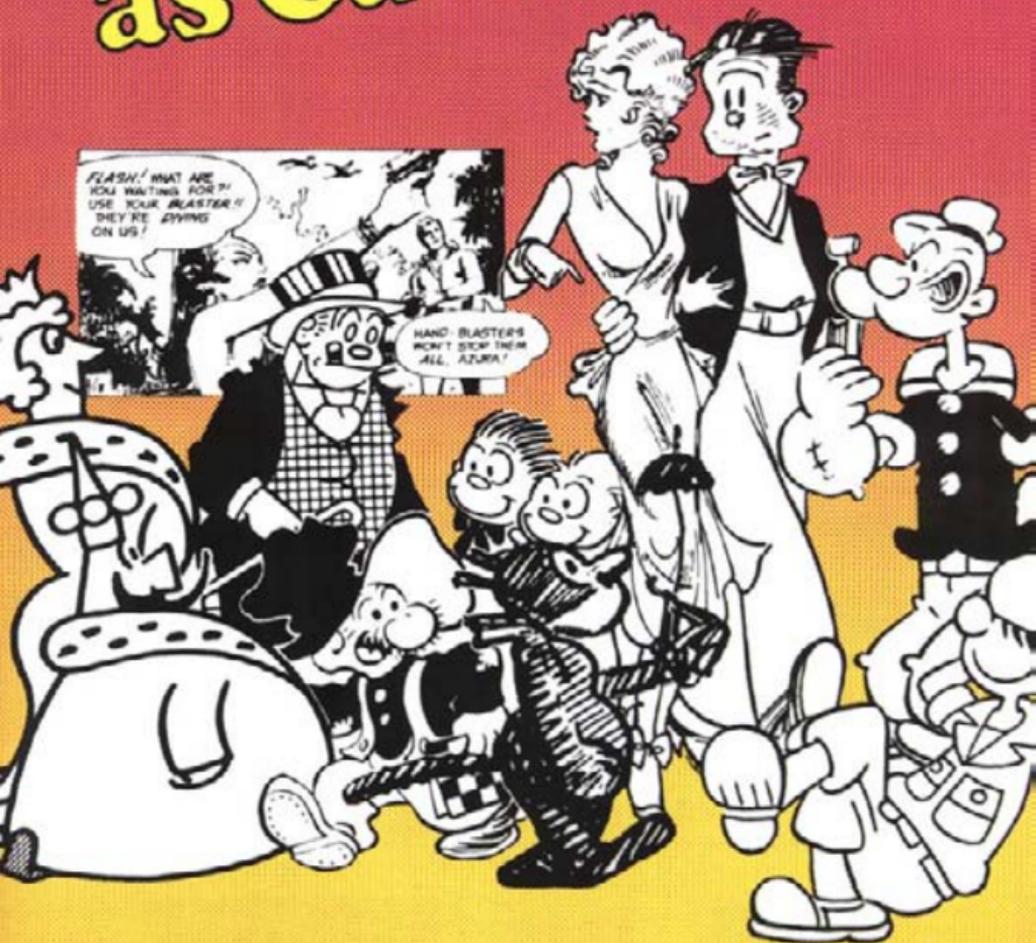


# Comics as Culture



**M. Thomas Inge**

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M. THOMAS INGE



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**For Will Eisner**

*master creator, mentor,  
and friend*

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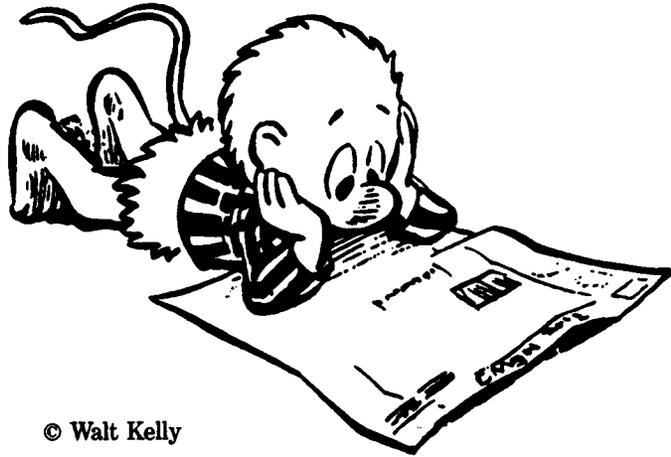
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© Walt Kelly

## Introduction: Comics as Culture

The comic strip may be defined as an open-ended dramatic narrative about a recurring set of characters, told in a series of drawings, often including dialogue in balloons and a narrative text, and published serially in newspapers. The daily and Sunday comic strips are part of the reading habits of more than one hundred million people of all educational and social levels. During the first half of this century, surveys have indicated that sixty percent of newspaper readers consider the comic page the priority feature in their reading. Along with jazz, the comic strip as we know it perhaps represents America's major indigenous contribution to world culture.

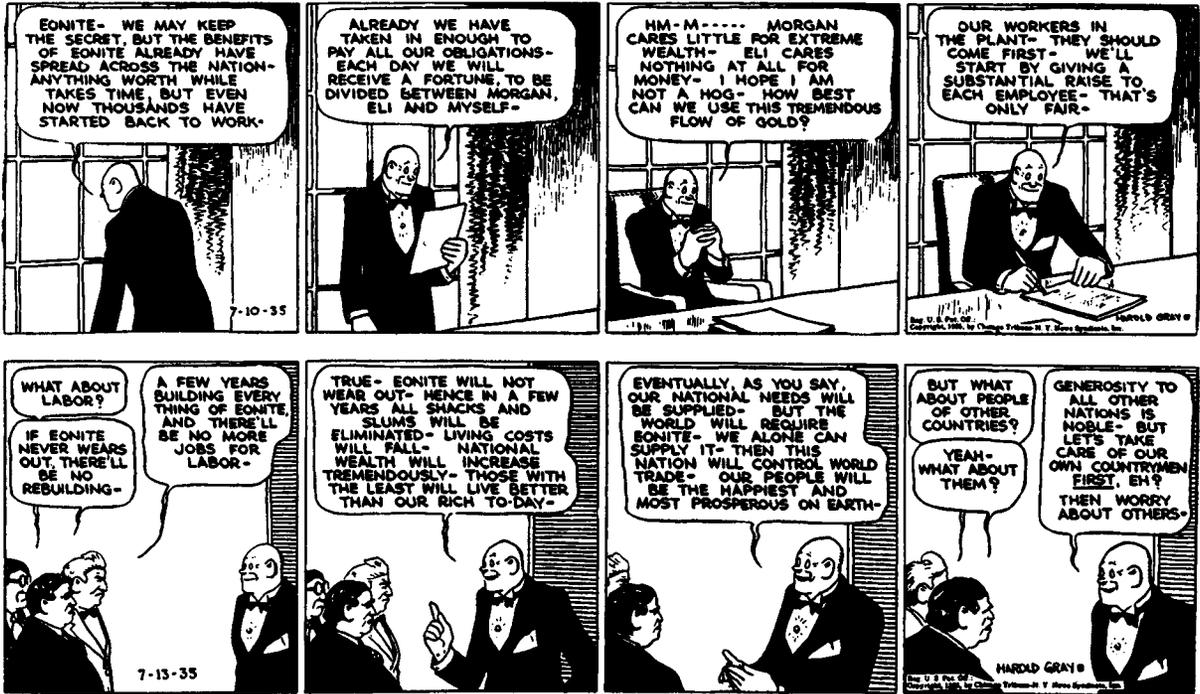
Comic books, on the other hand, originally an offshoot of the comic strip, are regarded with considerable suspicion by parents, educators, psychiatrists, and moral reformers. More than one critic has called them crude, vulgar, and

ultimately corrupting. They have been investigated by governmental committees and subjected to severe censorship. Yet even in today's uncertain market, more than two hundred million copies are sold a year, and the comic book collecting business has become an important area of investment with its own price guide and publications to facilitate exchange and trade.

Any phenomenon which plays so heavily on the sensibility of the American populace deserves study purely for sociological reasons if for no other. The comics serve as revealing reflectors of popular attitudes, tastes, and mores. Because comic strips appear in daily newspapers, a publication designed for family consumption, the syndicates, editors, and publishers submit strips to the severest kind of scrutiny and control to be sure that no parent, political bloc, or advertiser whose support they



Mort Walker, *Beetle Bailey*, April 8, 1982.  
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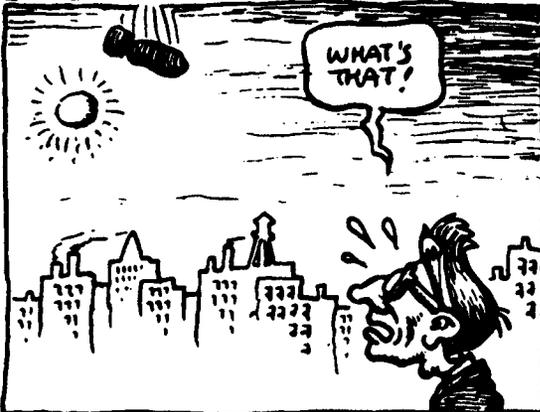
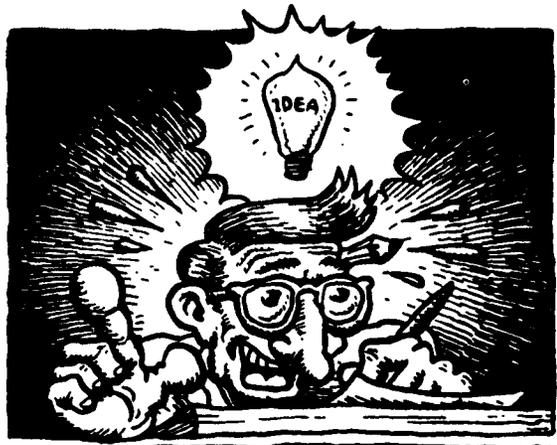
Harold Gray, *Little Orphan Annie*, July 10 and 13, 1935. These two sequences from a 1935 story reflect Harold Gray's view of benign American Capitalism and economic isolationism. If the first kind of generosity seldom happened, the last attitude has been all-too-characteristic of American foreign policy. © Tribune Media Services.

court will take offense. In the thirties conservative Harold Gray once had to redraw a *Little Orphan Annie* sequence because of its attack on one of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal programs, and the liberal slanted *Pogo* strip by Walt Kelly was often banned in the fifties in southern newspapers because of its satiric thrusts at school segregationists.

Examine the comics in any daily newspaper and each will be found to support some commonly accepted notion or standard of society. *Blondie*, *Archie*, *Mary Worth*, *Li'l Abner*, and *Gasoline Alley* in different ways support the idea that the family is the basic social unit. *Judge Parker*, *Rex Morgan*, *Mark Trail*, and *Gil Thorpe* support the concepts of decency and fair play among the professions. While *The Wizard of Id*, *B.C.*, *Peanuts*, *Funky Winkerbean*, *Doonesbury*, *Bloom County*, and *Shoe* are overtly satirical, they also provide a rational standard against which the aberrations they portray can be measured and found laughable. Why is Andy Capp, who drinks heavily, gambles, and commits adultery, permitted to violate these social taboos on the pages of the funny papers? Possibly because he is British and Americans are willing to forgive such behavior



Reggie Smythe, *Andy Capp*. Unlike most comic strip husbands, Andy Capp refuses to work, drinks to an excess, stays out all night, and chases other women. One reason for the popularity of this British strip may be Andy's willingness to recognize his human failings and accept himself for the miserable sinner that he is. Courtesy of Syndication International. Distributed by NAS, Inc.



Robert Crumb, *Mr. Sketchum*, 1970. Robert Crumb is a brilliant innovator in comic art who has spawned an entire school of imitators and has had a pronounced impact on popular iconography. As in this comic book page, Crumb often reflects a radical stance beyond any political ideology.  
© Robert Crumb.

on the part of Europeans. It is little wonder that Andy has such a large following—he is a stubbornly unpredictable and incorrigible individualist among many repetitious and mindless Caspar Milquetoasts. In the last decade, I should note, a few strips have daringly dealt with such hitherto forbidden topics as homosexuality, pre-marital sex, unmarried teen-age mothers, and mental retardation, but with trepidation and frequent local censorship.

Comic books are submitted for approval prior to publication to the Comics Code Authority, which exercises the most severe censorship applied to any mass media. Guidelines prohibit displays of sex, adultery, divorce, drugs, corrupt authority, or unpunished crimes. Submission to the authority requires a medium mainly irrelevant to reality; thus characters escape into a world of fantasy, dominated by super-heroes, a world in which both might and right are on the side of morality. When needed to support his country in time of war, however, no superhero has ever dared to refuse. The recent development of adult comic books and graphic novels, it should be noted, as well as alternative methods of publication and distribution, have greatly eroded the influence of the Authority.

The underground press comic strips and books of the 1960s and 1970s, which came into being partly to defy the restrictions of the Comics Code Authority, ironically failed to escape the basically political nature of American comic art. The defiance of American materialism by Robert Crumb, however, approaches anarchy, the rejection of society's sexual taboos by S. Clay Wilson is absolute, and the doomsday vision of Spain Rodriguez predicts the total destruction of civilization. These are radical stances beyond the pales of political ideology, but the underground cartoonists had the incredible luxury of unrestricted artistic freedom. This freedom has yielded brilliant results in the work of Art Spiegelman and Harvey Pekar, both of whom emerged from the underground comic book movement. Spiegelman's impressive retelling of the Holocaust in animal fable form *Maus*, haunting and moving in its intelligence and sincerity, brought a nomination for a National Book Critics Circle Award in 1987, the first comic book to be so honored, and Harvey Pekar's philosophic disquisitions on the nature of mundane life in Cleveland collected in *American Splendor* and *More American Splendor* in 1986 and 1987, have made him an influential



Superman.  
© DC Comics Inc.

force on the national cultural scene. These are obviously comic books with a serious purpose and something important to say about modern human life and history.

The comics also derive from popular patterns, themes, and symbols of Western culture. Chester Gould credited Sherlock Holmes as the inspiration for Dick Tracy (compare the shape of their noses), and Superman was partly based on Philip Wylie's 1930 novel *Gladiator*. *Bringing Up Father*, better known as "Maggie and Jiggs," by George McManus was inspired by a popular play, *The Rising Generation*, and Philip Nowlan based *Buck Rogers* on his own short story "Armageddon 2419." Dick Tracy's gallery of grotesque villains draws on the gothic tradition and follows the medieval concept that the outward appearance reflects the inner character. Flash Gordon, Prince Valiant, Captain Marvel, and the Fantastic Four draw on the heroic tradition to which Hercules, Samson, King Arthur, Beowulf, Davy Crockett, and Paul Bunyan belong.

If the comics have absorbed much of Western tradition, they have also had their influence on popular language and culture. Word coinages deriving from comic strips, and still found in



Alex Raymond, *Flash Gordon*, 1937 (detail).  
 © King Features Syndicate, Inc.

general currency, include *jeep*, *baloney*, *yard-bird*, *horsefeathers*, *google-eyed*, and *twenty-three skidoo*. There are Rube Goldberg contraptions and Mickey Mouse college courses. Certain foods are inextricably associated with certain characters: Popeye's spinach, Wimpy's hamburgers, Jiggs' corned beef and cabbage, and Dagwood's incredible sandwiches. Buster Brown clothes and shoes can still be bought, and the Prince Valiant haircut has been popular at times. While Charlie Brown did not invent the expletive "Good Grief!" it will be a long time before anyone can use the phrase without automatically associating it with Charles Schulz's diminutive loser in the game of life.

Perhaps a major reason for recognizing and studying the comics is the fact that they are one of the few native American art forms. Literature, drama, music, film, and the other forms of popular culture were largely established in Europe and most American practitioners (with perhaps the exception of film) have followed the patterns and standards established by foreign masters—Joyce in the novel, Ibsen in the drama, or the Beatles in popular music. In the comic strip and comic book, however, Americans



Chic Young, *Dagwood*. Dagwood prepares to make one of his famous sandwiches, a facsimile of which is found on many luncheon menus today.  
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# STEVE CANYON



WHY, IT'S STEVIE CANYON! ME SISTER IN SHANNON WRITES THAT YE PAID HER A PERSONAL CALL!

THAT I DID! SHE LOOKS FINE!



GLAD TO SEE YOU BACK, MR. CANYON! MY BOY GOT THE SOUVENIR YOU SENT FROM EGYPT!

GOOD!



CHECKING IN, SARGE!

CAPTAIN CANYON! I REALLY SWEAT YOU OUT THIS LAST TRIP! HEY! I HAVE A FINANCIAL STATEMENT FOR YOU...YOU'LL NEVER REGRET HAVING BACKED ME ON THIS DEAL!...



WANT A FLOWER FOR YOUR BUTTONHOLE, MR. CANYON?

NOT TODAY, POSIE - BUT YOU AND YOUR MOM ARE ABOUT DUE TO SEE A MOVIE ON ME...



GOING UP?

THIS CAR, MR. CANYON! -AND FOR YOU WE DON'T WAIT TILL IT'S FULL! RIGHT, IRMA?

R-R-RAJAH!



OH... HERE IS MR. CANYON, NOW...

HORIZONS Unlimited  
Show Office



IT'S A MR. DAYZEE, SECRETARY TO COPPER CALHOON, THE BIG SHE-WOLF OF THE STOCK MARKET...

HMM-THEY CALL HER "THE COPPERHEAD" I WONDER IF SHE HOWLS OR HISSES?



MR. CANYON?... MISS COPPER CALHOON WISHES TO ENGAGE YOUR PROFESSIONAL SERVICES! PLEASE COME TO MISS CALHOON'S APARTMENT AT ONCE...

... BUT WHAT IF I DON'T WANT TO PLACE MY SERVICES AT THE COMMAND OF MISS COPPER CALHOON?



MIS-TER CANYON! PEOPLE DO NOT REFUSE WHEN SUMMONED BY COPPER CALHOON!

AND ALL THIS TIME I THOUGHT I WAS A PEOPLE! GOOD MORROW, MR. DOOZIE!



WHY, MR. DIZZY, WHAT YOU SAID!..AND ME SO YOUNG AND IMPRESSIONABLE! ...THE CLICK YOU HEAR WILL MEAN YOU'RE SOLOING!

WELL, IT WOULD HAVE BEEN NICE TO HAVE MONEY TO PAY THIS OFFICE RENT BUT I GUESS IT'S BAD FORM TO GET INTO REGULAR HABITS LIKE THAT...



COPPER! YOU HEARD ON THE EXTENSION WHAT STEVE CANYON SAID!.. I HAVE NEVER BEEN SO...

I WANT THAT MAN!! ...GET HIM!

1-19



Milton Caniff, *Steve Canyon*, January 19, 1946. This is the first page of Caniff's new strip after he had ceased to draw *Terry and the Pirates*. The adventures of this soldier of fortune suited the tastes of a post-war America entering the Cold War.  
© Milton Caniff.