

An insight into some of the most influential newspaper comic strips

By Alicia Routliff

The history of the comic strip can be dated back many years, as an early form of storytelling through a sequence of visual images, familiar depictions and symbols. As a precursor to the comic strip, early depictions of illustrated storytelling could be seen in Bibles of the late Middle Ages as the tradition of “Paupers’ Bible” or “Biblia Pauperum” in Latin, as “biblical picture books that depict important scriptural events”¹. These Bibles were commonly printed in block-book form where text and picture were combined in a single woodcut print for each page, creating a visual, illustrated story. These often went in hand with the medieval illuminated manuscripts, “small scale” “medieval pictures”² and “portrait miniatures”², that were used as depictions of early historical figures with text on scrolls drawn coming out of their mouths.



Figure 1. ‘Paupers’ Bible’, 1472.



Figure 2. ‘The Bayeux Tapestry’, 11th century.

Another example of this can be seen in ‘The Beaux tapestry’, thought to be created in England during the 11th century, as it tells the story of the Norman conquest of England leading up to battle of Hastings through a 58-scene cloth illustrated tapestry. These early creations heavily rely on semiotics to provide a message to the viewers through these visual symbols.



Figure 3. 'A Rakes Progress' series of 8 paintings, William Hogarth, 1735

Printed forms of old storytelling came about in 19th century Germany and 18th century England as artist William Hogarth introduced humour to this narrative storytelling in his series of 8 narrative paintings collectively named 'A Rakes Progress' that were produced as works for engravings that were "to be sold by subscription as a series of eight prints"³, which may be one of the earliest inspirations for publicised printed illustrations/comics. These paintings reflected what he labelled as "modern moral subjects"³ during that time, telling the story of a man named 'Tom Rakewell' and how he met his downfall after throwing away his inherited money on an "extravagant lifestyle"³.

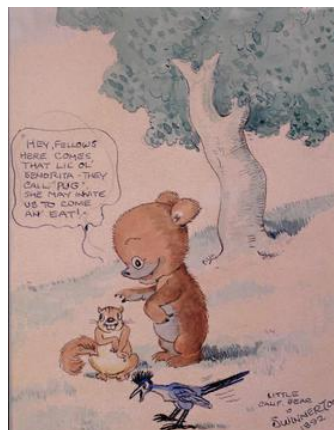


Figure 4. 'The little bears' newspaper illustration, Jimmy Swinnerton, 1893.

Our first introduction to the newspaper comic strip was in 1893 as American cartoonist Jimmy Swinnerton created 'The Little Bears', an illustration of a mascot bear that later became a comic in the 'San Francisco Chronicle' newspaper owned by William Randolph Hearst. Jimmy introduced multiple panel illustrations with humorous themes, much like those seen in future comics, also known as 'The Funnies' (or 'Sunday Funnies' a section of the newspaper dedicated only to comic strips), as his comics were later featured in their own section of the newspaper.

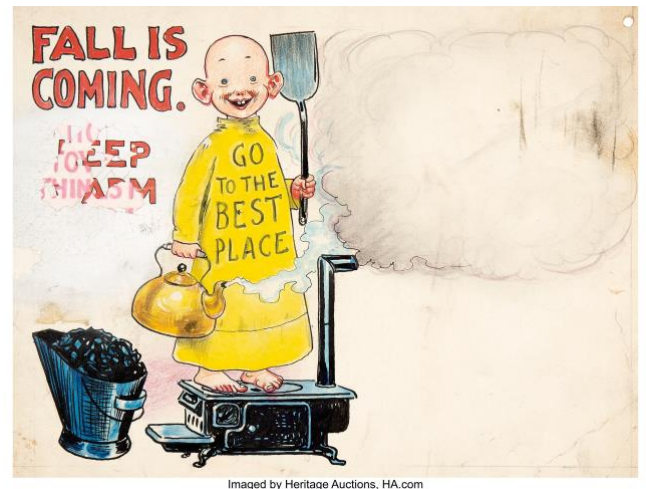


Figure 5,6. “The Yellow Kid Takes A Hand At Golf” comic and “Fall is Coming” newspaper illustration, Richard F. Outcault, 1899 and 1900.

In 1885, what some would call the most influential comic strip and “one of the first popular, serial comic figures circulating Sunday supplements”⁴, ‘The Yellow Kid’, (also known as Hogan’s Alley) was created by Richard F. Outcault, an American cartoonist, and featured in Joseph Pulitzer’s ‘New York World’. Though it was later produced in William Randolph Hearst’s ‘New York Journal’, which created confusion around the ownership of the sensational character ‘The Yellow Kid’ and a ‘newspaper war’ between these two publishers due to the comics ability to sell newspapers. “The Yellow Kid is an orphaned child (age unknown), who walks barefoot, dressed in a long, yellow shirt onto which words are printed in vernacular language”⁴ making him an instantly recognisable and eye-catching character for these bleak and dreary newspapers of the time, a perfect selling point.

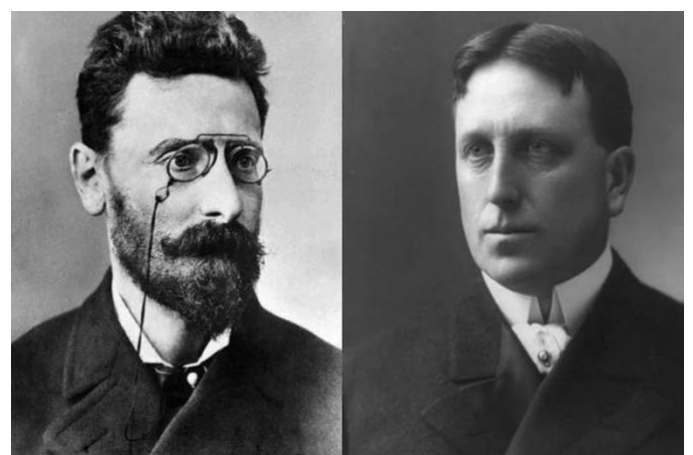
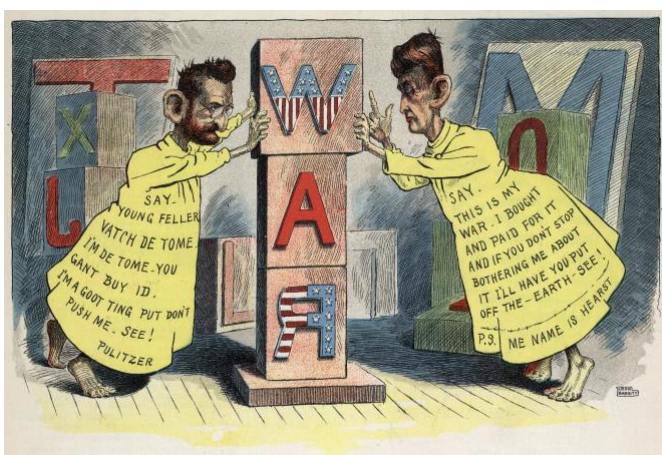


Figure 7. “Pulitzer vs. Hearst, Yellow Kids” editorial cartoon, Leon Barritt, 1898.

Figure 8. (Photographed) Newspaper publishers; Joseph Pulitzer (left) and William Randolph Hearst (right).

During this time of the ‘newspaper war’, (also known as ‘yellow journalism’), between William Randolph Hearst’s ‘New York Journal’ and Joseph Pulitzer’s ‘New York World’, there was a legal battle against German cartoonist ‘Rudolph Dirks’ and William Randolph Hearst’s newspaper, surrounding Dirks comic strip ‘The Katzenjammer Kids’, before it was later moved to Hearst’s rival Joseph Pulitzer’s ‘New York World’. The “Katzenjammer Kids” comic strip was published in 1897 and “holds the distinction of being the longest-running newspaper comic in history”¹² while continuing to be syndicated in many different newspapers today. It was “inspired by “Max Und Moritz”, the famous German children’s stories of 1860s”¹³ and “featured the adventures of Hans and Fritz, twins and fellow warriors in the battle against any form of authority”¹³.

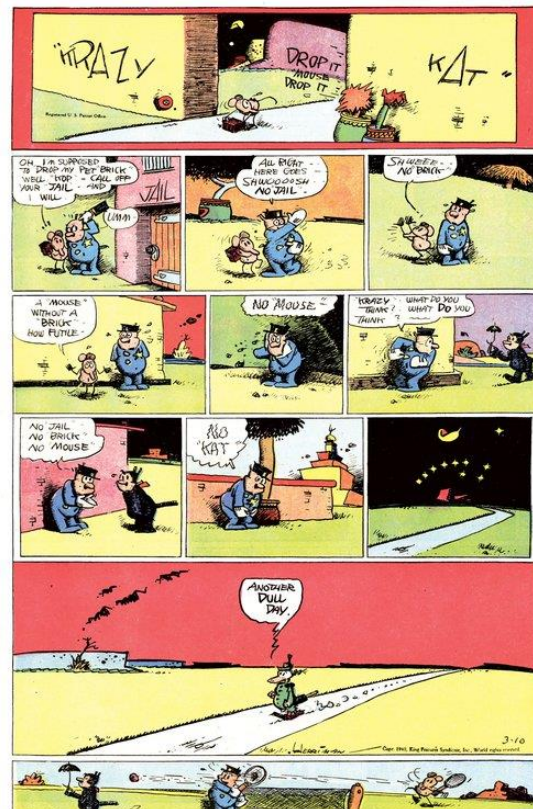
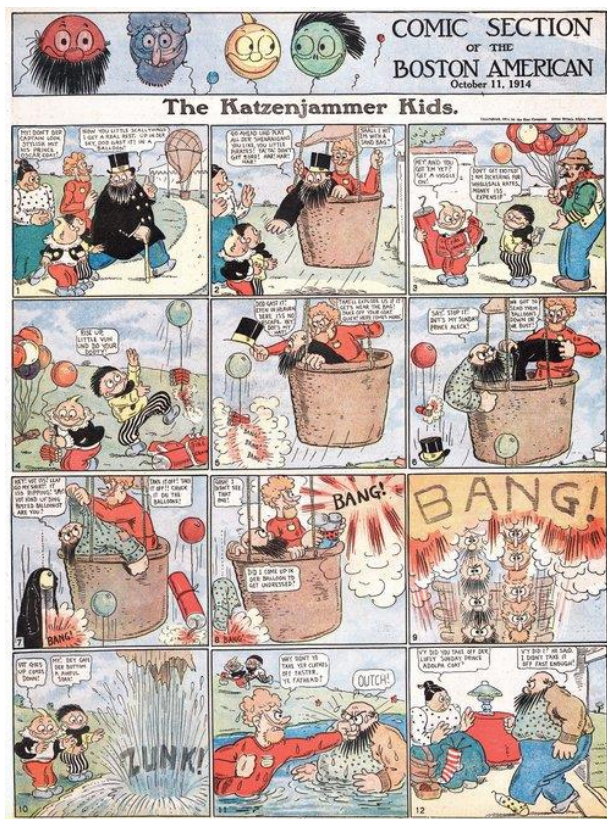


Figure 9. One of ‘The Katzenjammer Kids’ comic strips, Rudolph Dirks, 1914. Figure 10. A ‘Krazy Kat’ comic strip, George Herriman, 1940.

Soon after, the colourful illustrated comic ‘Krazy Kat’ was published also in William Randolph Hearst’s ‘New York Journal’ in 1913, created by George Herriman, an emerging biracial American cartoonist, a breakthrough for people of his racial ethnicity during the time. Herriman created Krazy Kat as a “twisted and tangled the three-lover triad and cat-mouse-dog triad and spent thirty-one years retying the same surreal knot”⁵ and brought new themes of existentialism and gender to the comedic newspaper comic strip, as the character of Kat is “neither he nor she, but rather, as Herriman put it, “a pixie,” whose pronouns switch within a strip and occasionally within a sentence, making the possible configurations and miscommunications of the comic infinite”⁵.



Figure 11. The first 'Garfield' comic, Jim Davis, 1978.

Two of the most infamous newspaper comic strips in modern times, and the world's most widely syndicated comic strip series, 'Peanuts', created by American cartoonist Charles M Schultz in the 1950's, and 'Garfield', created by American cartoonist Jim Davis in 1978, both took the world of newspaper comic strips and characters by storm. The 'Peanuts' comic strips were originally locally published in the 'St. Paul Pioneer Press' but later published in many various newspapers around the world, though Schulz was not happy with the name 'Peanuts' that was chosen by the newspaper syndicate, and instead "*wanted to call it Good Old Charlie Brown*"⁶– Charles M. Schulz, 1969. It has been described as "the ultimate perfection of the comic strip medium"⁸ as it "attracted the largest audience in the history of the medium"⁸. Similarly, the 'Garfield' comics were produced in a variety of newspapers, eventually becoming "the most widely syndicated comic strip in the world"⁹, above the 'Peanuts' comics.



Figure 12. 'Peanuts' first Sunday strip, Charles Schulz, 1952.

Schulz's 'Peanuts' comic strips set the story of the young boy and "unlikely round-headed hero, "Good ol' Charlie Brown."⁷, along with his dog 'Snoopy', "the coolest beagle on the planet"⁷, and a gang of other characters. The comic strips usually consisted of four panels and surrounded the relatable and humorous life of Charlie Brown dealing "with life's misfortunes—from a kite-eating tree to a football that was always pulled away a moment before he attempted to kick it—with a sigh, a "Good grief!"¹⁰ and usually ending with "a joke of some kind, often at Charlie Brown's expense"¹⁰. These comics continued syndication until February 13th, 2000, with Schulz last comic strip in the Newspapers one day after he unfortunately passed away. However, this was far from the end of his legacy as a cartoonist, nor the end

of Peanuts as the previously created comic strips are still syndicated in global newspapers today as well as the thriving Peanuts brand appearing in feature films, cartoons, “theme park attractions, public art projects, and every kind of consumer product from pj’s to popcorn makers”¹¹.



Figure 13. ‘Garfield’ comic strip, Jim Davis, 21 Nov 1979.

As for the world famous ‘Garfield’ comic strips, Jim Davis had created the series named after his grandfather “James Garfield Davis” with his stern personality and “*really kind eyes*”⁹ (-Jim Davis, 2018), along with inspiration from the “dozens of stray cats on Davis’s childhood farm”⁹. The main preface of the comedic comic strips follows the story of ‘Garfield’, a “lasagne-loving cat”⁹ and his “geeky owner Jon”⁹ along with his “brainless dog Odie”⁹ and a variety of other animal and human characters. The comic strips are usually three panels, featuring a comedic and relatable scene between ‘Garfield’ and ‘Jon’. Jim Davis recognises that “*when people laugh at Garfield, they’re recognising themselves*”⁹ (-Jim Davis, 2018) and states in an interview with the Guardian- “*We live in a time when we’re made to feel guilty about overeating, oversleeping, not exercising. Garfield not only does all that stuff but he’s cool with that. I think in a way he relieves our guilt*”⁹ and calling Garfield “*everyone’s alter ego.*”⁹. Today, new ‘Garfield’ comics are being produced and syndicated around the world with an array of merchandise, brand collaborations and movies, lightening the lives of millions as they fall in love with ‘Garfield’ and providing laughter to a world desperately in need of it.

The influence of comics in our world today is no small deal, as there are countless comic strips and characters that have shaped everything from branding to movies, fashion and cartoons, as well as providing a platform for social commentary. As new comic strips are produced and new artists emerge, there will always be an underlying inspiration from the cartoonists that built the foundations for the comic strip and the humour they can bring to our lives.

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Figures:

Figure 1. 'Paupers' Bible', 1472.

Sourced at: https://www.loc.gov/resource/gdcwdl.wdl_18195/?sp=7&r=-0.102,-0.032,1.327,1.374,0

Figure 2. 'The Bayeux Tapestry', 11th century.

Sourced at: <https://www.historyextra.com/period/norman/5-bayeux-tapestry-facts-what-is-it-why-was-it-made-and-what-story-does-it-tell/>

Figure 3. 'A Rakes Progress' series of 8 paintings, William Hogarth, 1735.

Sourced at: <https://www.duglebystephenson.com/auctions/230620231203/0/6103/WilliamHogarthBritishh16971764ARakesProgressplatesIXIIIcomple.aspx>

Figure 4: 'The little bears' newspaper illustration, Jimmy Swinnerton, 1893.

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Figure 5. "The Yellow Kid Takes A Hand At Golf" comic, Richard F. Outcault, 1897.

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Figure 6. “Fall is Coming” illustration, Richard F. Outcault, 1990.

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Figure 7. “Pulitzer vs. Hearst, Yellow Kids” editorial cartoon, Leon Barritt, 1898.

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Figure 8. Photographs of Newspaper publishers; Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst.

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Figure 12. ‘Peanuts’ first Sunday strip, Charles Schulz, 1952.

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