

Nancy Adams

## CHARLIE BROWN—ALL AMERICAN

The cartoon or comic strip has become as much a part of American life and lore as the hamburger or the foot-long hot dog. Children fight over the funny paper and old folks chuckle over it. More often than not, a cartoon is just enjoyed without much thought as to what makes it enjoyable.

Leading the pack of the most popular comic strips is unquestionably Charles Schulz's much loved "Peanuts." It's hard to find a person who doesn't like "Peanuts," although no one seems able to pinpoint just what it is that gives the strip universal popularity. Most folks, when asked, laugh and say that it is easy to identify with one of the cleverly drawn characters, since nearly all of them can see in their everyday lives a person resembling one of the "Peanuts kids"; or perhaps they simply like Snoopy. Schulz has apparently been able to capture in his appealing little people a human warmth, honesty, and fallibility that make his strip more than funny; they make it meaningful. It is so meaningful, in fact, that it has been used as a vehicle for political comments, social satire, and even a Gospel analogy!

One of the first traits noticeable about "Peanuts" is that all the characters (with the obvious exception of Snoopy) are children. No adults are ever seen or heard from and rarely are they even spoken about. Yet the small stars of the cartoon discuss world problems, philosophy, social stigmas, religion—all with a precociousness far beyond the behavior of real-life children but at the same time never being offensive. They present honest, ingenious, and funny ideas about these massively heavy topics, sometimes giving us "from the mouths of babes," surprisingly intelligent and workable solutions. All these are skillfully worked into a simple setting featuring a few characters, each with a personality distinctly his own yet remarkably similar to individuals around the reader. Realistic words arising from a situation that is totally unrealistic but never contrived, this is the charm of "Peanuts."

In addition to its philosophical appeal, "Peanuts" offers us both a friend and a scapegoat in a set-up which strikes a familiar chord in our subconscious. Each of us has met a Linus, tangled with a Lucy, or felt ourselves to be a Charlie Brown. Thus, we rise in righteous indignation when Lucy launches a new assault on the world, and we

know exactly how Charlie Brown must feel when he finds himself her major target—again. It's happened to us! Occasionally, too, our allegiance shifts exactly as it would in a true-to-life situation, as when we feel sorry for Lucy when she sadly observes, "Nobody understands us crabby people!" On our bad days, each of us has felt the same persecuted way.

From a purely aesthetic standpoint, the "Peanuts" strip is drawn cleverly and appealingly. Simple lines and consistent characteristics, like Charlie Brown's striped sweater and Snoopy's snoozing posture atop his doghouse, make it easy and enjoyable to read. Each little face retains its own personality and its relationship to the others, and the adventures that befall the youngsters follow a pattern. In summer the kids play baseball, one losing season after another, and in winter Snoopy stalks the infamous Red Baron with his trusty Sopwith Camel. Lucy continually picks on Charlie Brown, chases Schroeder, and yells at Linus, while poor Charlie Brown (notice he is never referred to as just "Charlie") woos the little red-haired girl from afar. Rarely does a new character enter the strip or change the course of action, but for a reason which bespeaks the artistry of the author, each adventure has one new twist which prevents the recurrence from ceasing to make us laugh. In association with the simple consistent pattern of "Peanuts," it is interesting to note that no character plays the title role. Perhaps Schulz selected the name "Peanuts" because his cartoon deals with bits of many topics, or because his characters are children, or possibly because it had absolutely no relation to the strip; we speculate but don't know.

Although it appears I have overlooked the most lovable character in the strip, I haven't; I merely feel that Snoopy is entitled to a paragraph of his own. It isn't clear exactly how one identifies with this little scamp, for he isn't a person but he seems more human than canine. He adds humor by his imaginative antics on his doghouse, and gives the reader an opportunity for a mischievously vengeful grin with his impish harassment of the disagreeable Lucy. His philosophy of life is charmingly pertinent and may be summed up well in his sermon, "Dancing is good for the soul! If you can't dance, you should at least be able to do a happy hop!" In this, as in most of his remarks, much of the appeal is derived from the artful way in which lovable little Snoopy is drawn. A beagle face that never looks truly doggish reveals every thought in Snoppy's crafty little mind, and his whole body is

constructed to accentuate his moods. The reader need only look at Snoopy in one of his poses—a vulture, or the World War I flying ace behind enemy lines—to find himself chuckling at the warm reality of so unreal a character as a dog who plays shortstop. Snoopy seems to speak for some underlying part of each one of us, the secret cache of our mischief and imagination.

Whatever bit of magic has made “Peanuts” the nation’s best-loved comic strip is undoubtedly a trade secret. That bit of magic makes nearly everyone an addict of the strip after only one or two exposures, and I often wonder whether the charm of “Peanuts” may be akin to the charm of a cheery companion outfitted with a sympathetic ear and a kind compliment!

Jim Kurtz

My friend the night

Walking alone going nowhere,  
with my friend the night.  
We have a lot of secrets together,  
that I can slip behind its veil of darkness.  
My footsteps are unguided,  
I can lose myself better alone,  
The paths I have crossed are meaningless,  
no one will ever follow after.

What I have done many have done better,  
so I just hide again.  
An hourglass and a teaspoon,  
can measure me.  
Caught in a stream of indecision,  
don't speak out you may be wrong.  
In the darkness the world can drift by,  
I will pretend,