You're a Good Man, Charles Schulz

Tim Madigan
St. John Fisher College

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You’re a Good Man, Charles Schulz

Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay’s first paragraph.

"A beloved comic strip which in a sense both ceased to exist and yet continues to be published is “Peanuts,” created by Charles Schulz. Begun in 1950 with the original title “Li’l Folks” (Schulz hated the title “Peanuts,” which was imposed upon him by the syndicate which published the strip), it ran for an astonishing 50 years, ceasing publication in 2000, just a few days before Schulz’s own death. Unlike most other comic strips, Schulz was not only its sole writer—he actually drew each and every strip himself, an almost unheard of state of affairs in an industry where creators usually have assistants doing much of the artwork, where many original creators eventually lose control of their creations, and where the characters “live on” long after their originators depart, willingly or otherwise."
A beloved comic strip which in a sense both ceased to exist and yet continues to be published is “Peanuts,” created by Charles Schulz. Begun in 1950 with the original title “Li’l Folks” (Schulz hated the title “Peanuts,” which was imposed upon him by the syndicate which published the strip), it ran for an astonishing 50 years, ceasing publication in 2000, just a few days before Schulz’s own death. Unlike most other comic strips, Schulz was not only its sole writer—he actually drew each and every strip himself, an almost unheard of state of affairs in an industry where creators usually have assistants doing much of the artwork, where many original creators eventually lose control of their creations, and where the characters “live on” long after their originators depart, willingly or otherwise.

As David Michaelis points out in his 2007 book Schulz and Peanuts: A Biography, it’s not too much to say that Charles Schulz and his creations---Charlie and Sally Brown, Lucy and
Linus Van Pelt, Schroeder, “Pig-Pen”, Snoopy and Woodstock—were impossible to separate. The comic strip was Schulz’s life, and he put much of his own whimsical attitudes in it. It’s not surprising, perhaps, that he refused to relinquish control, and stipulated that, while the original strips could continue to appear after his death, no one else could take over “Peanuts,” as was done with other such strips as “Little Orphan Annie,” “Blondie,” or “Dick Tracy.” “Peanuts” was Charles Schulz.

Perhaps it’s not purely coincidental that Schulz—a man who was very learned in intellectual issues—began to be published at almost the same time as the philosophy known as Existentialism came into the American public’s consciousness. Michaelis quotes Schulz as saying: “I’m not a philosopher . . . I’m not that well-educated” (Michaelis, Schulz and Peanuts: A Biography 2007: page 394).

But, as Shakespeare might say, Schulz doth protest too much. While it was primarily a humorous “comic,” “Peanuts” was itself labeled as “existential” from an early stage, as it dealt with such themes as loneliness, dread, contingency, and despair, all of which could be found in the works of such Existential thinkers as Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and Albert Camus. In particular, one can find many similarities between Jean-Paul Sartre’s famous 1944 play No Exit and the “Peanuts” world. Both seem to take place in a self-enclosed absurd setting, where characters (Estelle, Garcin and Inez in Sartre’s work, and Charlie Brown and the Little Red-haired Girl, Sally Brown and Linus, Lucy and Schroeder, among others in Schulz’s universe) never seem to connect, and engage in endless variations of
unrequited love and abusive relationships. Yet, unlike in Sartre’s hellish world, the “Peanuts” gang does form a genuine community, and by somehow surviving the daily travails of their environment through their constant philosophical questionings they help us all to better understand the human condition. Like the eternal rock pusher at the end of Camus’s seminal essay “The Myth of Sisyphus”, one must imagine Charlie Brown happy.

One example, among countless others, of the “Peanuts” community in action can be found in the strip appearing on Sunday, September 17, 1967 (the Sunday strips, by the way, took a full page in the newspaper, and unlike the daily strips they were entitled “Peanuts Featuring ‘Good Ol’ Charlie Brown’”—one small way for Schulz to try to transcend the title he was stuck with but never loved). In it, Charlie Brown stands, as is his wont, on the pitcher’s mound during a typical losing game for his team. “Nine home runs in a row!! Good Grief!” he intones. His catcher Schroeder comes up to the mound to ask him what the cause of his outburst is. “We’re getting slaughtered again, Schroeder,” he says. “I don’t know what to do. Why do we have to suffer like this?” A perfectly reasonable question—indeed, regular readers of the strip might well ask that question about the “Peanuts” gang in general, as the team never wins a game, the love circles never close, and Charlie Brown never gets to kick the football Lucy holds so enticingly at the beginning of every football season. But Schroeder gives a rather perplexing response: “Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward.” Not surprisingly, Charlie Brown can only reply by asking “What?”
At this point, Linus comes up to the mound to inform the befuddled pitcher/manager that Schroeder had been quoting from the Old Testament’s Book of Job, seventh verse, fifth chapter. Linus—the resident intellectual, noted for his brilliance but also for his insecurity which causes him to suck his thumb and hold onto his blanket to endure the world’s travails—starts to explain why the problem of suffering is such a profound one. But his bossy sister Lucy interrupts him in mid-sentence, as is her wont, to assert, “If a person has bad luck, it’s because he’s done something wrong. That’s what I always say.” As Schroeder reminds her, that is exactly what Job’s friends tell him when he is afflicted with boils and other unbearable sufferings, even though he knows he is a good and faithful servant to God. Unimpressed, Lucy tells him, “What about Job’s wife? I don’t think she gets enough credit!” Those who know the Book of Job will recall her advice to her husband when he asks why he is being made to suffer so: “Curse God and die.” A very Lucy-like response!

The rest of the panels consist of other characters discussing various reasons why suffering may occur, with a thoughtful-looking Snoopy taking in the deep discussion. It is a master class on getting across rather profound observations in a ridiculous setting, not unlike a play by Samuel Beckett or indeed Archibald MacLeish’s 1958 play J.B., itself a variation of the Book of Job. And to cap it all off, the final panel shows Charlie Brown, alone again on his sad pitcher’s mound, with a forlorn expression on his face. “I don’t have a ball team . . .” he moans, “I have a theological seminary.” A pessimist might say this shows the futility of the “Peanuts”
world but an optimist would say that, while the team never seems to win a game, it does have some great conversations.

One of the strengths of “Peanuts” was the way that Schulz was able to time and again return to the same themes, but give them interesting—and often unexpected—variations. This is best demonstrated by the annual tradition, every autumn, of having Charlie Brown rush passionately down the field to kick the football Lucy is holding, only to have it snatched away at the last second. David Michaelis writes about this yearly event: “Schulz originally drew the football-kicking episode to show that Charlie Brown was incapable of combating Lucy’s shrewdness . . . From first (1952) to last (1999), each setup of the football encouraged Charlie Brown to one more act of determination and, ultimately, martyrdom” (Michaelis, 2007: page 510).

But Schulz, in the very last such example in 1999, threw a curve ball at his readers. Lucy is suddenly called into the house by her mother. She asks her baby brother Rerun to hold the ball for her. When he enters the home she asks him anxiously, “What happened? Did you pull the ball away? Did he kick it? What happened?” To which Rerun slyly says in return, “You’ll never know. . .” And neither will we! Perhaps Good Old Charlie Brown finally did kick one out of the park after all.

In another complicated yet typical “Peanuts” scenario, Lucy—ashamed to be associated with a brother who clutches a security blanket—grabs it from Linus and tells him she’s hidden it and that he has to get used to being without his blanket. Linus begins to hallucinate, faint, and
fear for his sanity—rather extreme stuff for a “comic” strip—but Snoopy (usually lost in his own world of fantasy and often oblivious to the concerns of the humans around him, especially the “round-headed kid” who feeds him but whose name he can never remember) saves the day. Using his beagle sense of smell, he finds the blanket where Lucy has buried it, and digs it up and returns it to its happy owner. The overjoyed and fully recovered Linus thanks him profusely, and in the final panel, Snoopy, lying on top of his doghouse, thinks: “Every now and then I feel that my existence is justified.” It’s hard to find a better example of existentialism in action.

As he drew the final “Peanuts” comic strip just days before his own death, one hopes that Charles Schulz appreciated all the joy that he had brought to the world by creating this timeless work. Like Snoopy, he had every right to feel that his existence was truly justified.

Tim Madigan teaches in the Department of Philosophy and Classical Studies and is the first director of the Irish Studies Program. He also serves as the Honorary Coach for the Fisher Cardinals football team every season.