"[R]espite from the burdens of hierarchy"[1] for Comics and for Children: An Expanded Consideration of 1937 British Anthology Comics

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Abstract

Thierry Groensteen's *The Expanding Art of Comics: Ten Modern Masterpieces*, models an expansive approach to comics analysis. Rather than accepting one coherent "progression" of influence and development, he highlights how self-aware connections and contradictions in the work, "unceasingly opens up new expressive terrain" (Groensteen 4). This article considers one particular type of British weekly comic for children through Groensteen's expanding prism. Since they began to be published in the late 1930s, these comics have, confusingly, been simultaneously side-lined as immature commercial pulp, and taken for granted as a central success of the British comics industry. Inspired by Groensteen's expanding way of looking, this article will reconsider how these hugely popular but critically problematic comics are enmeshed in a complex network of influences and associations.

The problem of a general introduction

In 2018 *The Beano*, a British weekly, celebrated its 80th birthday. Sadly, its big brother, *The Dandy,* only managed to make it to 75 before moving online in 2012 (a change which lasted six months before the publisher discontinued it entirely). These hugely popular and long-lasting weeklies from the Scottish publisher DC Thomson are an unquestionably British institution which has stood the test of time. Read by generations of youngsters, and outliving many rival (often similar) publications, these anthology comics, richly spiced with irreverence, ridicule, and ludicrous nonsense have continued to thrive. Their longevity alone has established this particular form of comic as worthy of critical attention. However, the sheer fun of them has tended to hamper their being taken seriously.

[1] In his cultural analysis of popular comedy, Medhurst argues that both music hall and carnival offer "respite from the burdens of hierarchy to audiences stuck on low social rungs, and that respite is encapsulated in laughs" (Medhurst 71).

Certain individual artists who worked, or continue to work on these comics have garnered interest. Names such as Dudley D. Watkins, Ken Reid and David "Davey" Law are familiar within the comics canon. Similarly, certain popular characters remain iconic, such as the trouble-making schoolboy Dennis the Menace. These characters often epitomise a tone of mischief and liberty, embodying the complex social negotiations of children and power that have come to be associated with the comics. The heritage remains important. Dundee is the home of DC Thomson and The Scottish Centre for Comics Studies (Dundee University). In 2015, one of the twenty-five surviving first issues of *Beano*, along with its advertising flyer, was sold at auction for £17,300, more than three times the original estimate. The first issue of *Dandy*, complete with original free gift, sold in 2004 for £20,350. Both comics originally cost 2d. The earliest editions remain objects of wondrous appreciation, "the number one trophy item," according to Malcolm Phillips (Smith), and the comics are spoken of with significant respect and reverence within the history of the media.

It seems then rather curious that the field of comic criticism has largely neglected these publications as objects of study, and has struggled to take seriously children's reading experience of them. One explanation for this might be the inherent lack of gravitas associated with the comics themselves, another might be the intended child audience. Unlike its contemporary, *Action Comics* (an American DC Comics publication), *Dandy* and *Beano* were anthology comics specifically directed towards children. The juvenile reputation of these hugely popular comics has for a long time fuelled a pervading denigration of the wider British comics industry. Such a judgment however is unfairly weighted. It compares what is heralded as the Golden Age of "grown up" American comics for adults, launched with the release of Superman in June 1938, with a peak in readership of children's weekly humour comics. Although these two events occurred at the same time, the comics were very different media. Despite the growing market for adult comics internationally, the commercial decision of DC Thomson to continue tapping the independent child consumers of the late 1930s was a fruitful one. Through inclusion of often mischievous child characters and trick toys as free gifts, this distinctively child oriented product was positioned antagonistically against adult authority. This move reinforced the strength of the comics' reputation as an anti-establishment publication, constructing an associated "child only" desirability and boosting popularity. However, this targeted child readership tarred the publications with a brush of simplicity or unsophistication. In comics criticism, particularly in relation to the linear progression that Groensteen deconstructs, comics

"just" for children were seen much like children and dismissed on the same grounds; problematic objects of study, incomplete and constantly changing and therefore liable to produce inconclusive results. This article attempts to offer a fresh look at these comics through consideration of their "expansive" qualities. As Groensteen does, this article will identify self-aware and conscious devices intended to endear the form to the audience. Through a specific case study of one comic, this analysis will strive to unpack the complex nature of these publications, and to connect the significance of their multifaceted construction with the intended specific readership. Furthermore, investigation of the patchwork of influences, styles, and contradictions within one publication will serve to highlight the important contextual factors relevant to the genesis of these enduring comics.

DC Thomson was not by any means a lone comics publisher in 1937 Britain. Many of the newspapers enfolded comic supplements. Humorous family magazines, such as Amalgamated Press' *Comic Cuts*, which had been successful since the 1890s, included single panel caricatures, short comic strips, and text stories. Magazines solely for young readers were also thriving, many of which included strips of various lengths as well as picture stories with captions, alongside their regular text stories. The sheer number of these kind of periodicals evidences their popularity, and the launch of several new publications around this time demonstrates their continued potential for experimentation. In characterising the late 1920s and early 1930s in European comics development, Booker acknowledges a general correlation between genre and style that progressively divided publications. The development of adventure comics separated the visual, exaggerated humour style from the less caricatured adventure style. "Some new magazines," he goes on to say, "such as Britain's *The Dandy* and *The Beano*, both published by DC Thompson, were almost completely filled by local artists who worked in the more visual style without captions" (Booker 128). What seems curious is that despite general recognition of the importance and popularity of these early comics, criticism has frequently found it sufficient to talk about them in broad terms applying unproven (often sentimental) sweeping statements. Booker, as one example amongst others, flattens out the very interesting and diverse varieties of styles and stories which *Dandy* and *Beano* actually contained.

To demonstrate their delinquent nature, I will focus in detail on the content of just one comic, the very first *Dandy*. Rather than considering the stories and strips within their long seriality and consequent reputations, I will inspect them within their original context, wrestling with the contradictions of influence, style, popular culture, and

childhood, collated within the first week of December 1937. The choice of a first edition might be considered methodologically problematic, as first editions are often judged as exceptions with the freedom to be experimental and unhampered by reader responses. They are also, frequently, designed to be especially attention-grabbing. In the case of these DC Thomson publications however, there is a strong argument to be made that much of the experimentation had already taken place. This can be predominantly traced through the "big five,"[2] a range of popular publications established progressively since 1921, within which DC Thomson had increasingly begun to include (to test out) different kinds of visual storytelling. The strategy for grabbing readers' attention with the launch issue of *The Dandy* was therefore not new content, but rather pitched itself as "new" in its ambition to be predominantly a visual comic. It drew together the best of the possible assortment of forms from the other publications, a feature it continued to use throughout its lifespan.

In an effort to resist generalisations and to speak specifically about this first edition, it will be necessary to summarise the content. The launch edition includes twenty-five different stories. Six of these are text stories, each illustrated by at least one main picture; however, they do not use pictures and text in tension. Four of the stories are picture stories, this is the phrase used to introduce them in the comic itself and signifies the use of panels and explicatory captions (but not balloons). The other fifteen features in the comic are visual strips, some silent, some using balloons and others using both balloons and captions. These strips vary in length from a minimum of four panels (often compressed in the news press style of earlier caricature), to a maximum of a double-page spread. The drawing styles are equally diverse, including, to use Booker's terms, both the less caricatured adventure style and the more visual style, and sometimes what could be described as a combination. It seems worthy of note that eight of the twenty-five stories fall into the category which Booker claimed was not specific to *The Dandy*, that of the less caricatured adventure.

In the mythology of DC Thomson's comics history, there are many widely touted arguments for the initial success of *The Dandy*. The two most often flaunted are, firstly, that unlike other magazines at the time, it featured a full-colour cover page and embraced "American" speech balloons rather than using captions, and secondly, that it was predominantly made up of the visual, caricature, slapstick style strips. Neither of these statements is entirely true. Indeed, the reason for its

[2] DC Thomson's "big 5" were a range of story papers for children: *Adventure* (1921-1961 merged with *Rover*), *The Wizard* (1922-1963 merged with *Rover*, relaunched 1970-1978), *Rover* (1922-1973), *The Skipper* (1930-1941), *Hotspur* (1933-1959).

successful survival over the many similar rivals remains an enigma (Murray; A. Fairlie; Gravett and Stanbury). Predating *The Dandy,* children's comics already used colour printing and a combination of different kinds of strips—silent, with balloons, with captions, and some with both. To some extent the means of narration reflected the intended ages of readers. Often, the silent strips used animal characters for younger readers, while those with longer captions tended to be the action and adventure stories for older readers. However, it is with such sweeping statements that I too enter the murky world of oversimplification. The cover strip of Korky the Cat contradicts this generalised theory. With an anthropomorphic character and being predominantly silent, it might seem that this was intended as a strip for young readers. However, Korky was popular with readers of all ages (including adults). This one example immediately epitomises the complexity of studying these inconsistent comics: there is not one "main" character which dominates the fan base, there is not one regular style of drawing, not one customary genre of story, nor one standard length of strip. One critical approach is to study individual strips and their development or progression over time, treating them as serialisations. Whilst this widely accepted method affords explorations of a particular artist, style, character, or narrative, it decontextualizes the strips from the whole comic. By nature of their publication as one anthology, these strips were intended to be read together. Unlike the text story papers though, which often ended with a cliff-hanger to encourage recurrent readership, it was not necessarily assumed that you had read the previous week's edition of *The Dandy*. The strips rather concluded with strapline spoilers inviting the reader to join in the fun the following week.

Anti-stardom and disloyal audiences

What little evidence there is about the consumers of children's magazines at the time suggests that readers were not loyal customers (A. Fairlie; Edwards; Gibson). They might have had a favourite story or character, but there was simply never enough material for a child to read. The anecdotal stories of comics as child-currency confirm this notion. Between themselves children would agree to buy one or another publication, so that they could be swapped. It seems that it was this "disloyal" approach to consuming comics which led to a massive increase in the number and variety of publications during the 1900s. Publishers fuelled this multiplicity by introducing new publications, many of which contained very little new, but audiences loved them just

the same. This trend, which peaked between about 1925 and 1935, was part of a general change in the targeted marketing of British presses. Newspaper readership in the 1800s had been predominantly middle- and upper-class, and ideologically or politically conformist. In line with this, parents would buy their child magazines connected to their own, often doctrinally aligned, reading habits.

The early nineteenth-century saw the British "press wars," an economic fight for domination which chiefly related to subscriptions and the profitability of advertising space. Although this ended with the start of actual war in 1938, the effect on the commercialism of the press remained (Williams 154). The dramatic change in popular press print readership was only possible because of an increase in the number of working-class readers, itself a result of two significant social shifts—new education laws had led to improved literacy and increased free (unsupervised) time for children, and improving economic conditions had begun to offer many a limited disposable income. These two advances led to the expansion of a new social group, the literate, consuming, independent, working-class youth.

The eclecticism of this readership is important. Spending on popular entertainment increased due to gradual economic growth. The ensuing competition that this created led to marketing and reputation gaining greater significance. By the turn of the century, the entertainment industry also became obsessed with the big names, the stars, the heroes. Shirley Temple, Charlie Chaplin, and Superman remain household names today. Bruce Babington explores more thoroughly the wider economic and practical reasons that Britain "lagged behind" America in regard to "the 'systematic business' of starmaking." Relevant here though are the "[s]trong cultural attitudes towards the vulgarity of self-display" that Babington identifies (Babington 13). Victorian middle-class values remained culturally entrenched in British etiquette well into the 1900s. Amongst these values was a resistance to haughtiness; anything like pride was a significant taboo. Embedded in this attitude was an opposition to publicity and self-promotion. Former theatre performers in light of these principles, whether of mainstream drama, music hall, or film, had achieved status and admiration for the variety of roles they were able to embody with conviction. It was the ability to adapt, to change, to master a new role with equal authenticity which had captivated audiences. This theatrical expectation left "an 'impersonatory' ideology […] which led to feelings that major players should succeed across many genres" (Babington 14). This ideology hampered "starmaking" because it applauded performers for the skilfulness of their enactment rather than idolising them for their own identities; audiences relished

the embodiment of characters rather than the player. Such a contrasting attitudes to expectations of performers has been offered as one of the main reasons for the high migration of actors from Britain to America, a trend which began with early show performers and has continued to today. In considering children's popular press in the 1930s, this ideological factor has perhaps been overlooked. In order to expand our reading of these comics, we therefore need to acknowledge the importance of variety, and the implications this has for audience tastes at the time.

Working-class entertainment in the late 1800s was music-hall: cheaper than theatre, less censored than the printing presses, and not reliant on audience literacy. It was also intentionally constructed to be more locally relevant than the moving picture shows. Shows were daily, putting pressure on the performers whether acting, storytelling, or singing, to initiate original "turns" with new characters and fresh, relevant ideas. Entertainers would be one amongst many in every show, consequently the sense of an ensemble remained key. For the audience, the whole experience, not just one named performer, was central to the pleasure; fans sought the spectacle not the star. As Andy Medhurst identifies, "music hall was often vibrantly vulgar, testing the limits of censorship and questioning the stranglehold of 'decency,' so often a code word for attempts to foist the constrictions of middle-class propriety onto working-class lives" (Medhurst 66). This inherent social commentary is significant. The laughter was often pointed and reflexive, growing from the familiar, class-based, everyday experiences of the audience:

> Music hall, and the comedy that continues to flow from it even today, stood for something else, something simple but profoundly political: a belief in the value of working-class experience. (Medhurst 67)

Music hall was notably more like carnival than theatre in that it encouraged participatory audiences. Whether joining in with the known songs or interacting with the performers, the public were united by their engaged laughter; music hall was an event not a show. Furthermore, while the (predominantly American) film industry of the early 1900s often depicted lavishness, luxury, and conspicuous consumption, the British working-class audiences were still reeling from the impact of World War I and the economic crash of the 1920s. Cinema had the luxury of constructing a set to sustain an artifice. However, the interactional quality of music hall forced self-awareness. Performers would be overt and conscious in their construction of the illusion, acknowledging their

own working-class roots, and playing in-amongst the audience. They used the space between fantasy and reality to create a pretence shared by both audience and performer. Laughing together held powerful associations connected with surviving together, building a sense of unity and loyalty which remained as people faced the realities of the difficult social conditions outside the shows. Ridiculing unrealistic aspirations, unobtainable ideals, and the naive expectations of the rich or the upper classes were tropes central to music-hall entertainment, and these re-emerged in the humour of the comics.

Other forms of popular performance undoubtedly influenced the style and tone of these comics. Smolderen has acknowledged how influential British Christmas pantomime was for Winsor McCay even at the turn of the century:

> *Slumberland*'s magical world of fairies, giants, magicians, and princesses was an unmistakable tip of the hat to the London theatrical extravaganzas, whose lavish production values were matched by McCay's virtuoso treatment of *trompe l'oeil* architecture, fantastic casts, costumes, and special effects. The classy reference to this very British genre of entertainment was certainly not lost on the contemporary American reader. (Smolderen 157)

Yet, while McCay adopted the "classy" aspects of this wondrous spectacle of entertainment, the DC Thomson comics rather adopted the more ridiculous aspects, devices embedded more in the history of circus freak shows than of theatre. Typical of both music hall and pantomime was the acknowledgment of the façade; a conscious acceptance that such performances were an illusion. There was a vital pleasure in the camaradery of this approach to entertainment. It was not making a fool of the audience or taking advantage of their gullibility, but it was rather a sharing of the experience. This was especially true for the pantomimes as they increasingly utilised elaborate special effects. They consciously maintained their separation from the high art of theatre by continuing to include the audience, through direct address and audience participation. Partaking and inclusivity rather than distanced spectatorship lie at the core of these forms of entertainment.

The dominance of cinema was rapidly increasing, and live entertainment was in decline. For variety audiences, the movie stars and their indulgent, lavish lifestyles were farfetched. They were ridiculed for taking themselves too seriously in comparison to the British popular performers. This did not mean that cinema was unappreciated by British

audiences, "the number of cinemas increased to meet the extra demand, rising from some 3,000 in 1926 to 4,967 in 1938" (Richards 147). Nevertheless, when we consider these figures in light of the "disloyal" notion of popular entertainment, these numbers perhaps say less about audiences' preferences for movies, and more about their desire and need for escapism, distraction, for "respite" in whatever form it might be offered (Medhurst 71). British children's humour comics were products of this context. Acknowledging how influenced they are by self-aware, eclectic, humour-oriented popular culture, offers a fresh focus on their nature and construction. Taking for instance the very first *Dandy* as one ensemble performance, the traces of inspiration from other areas of popular entertainment are clearly relevant (unashamedly "copied"). Just as in popular performance, making fun of symbolic authority figures through deconstructing class, status, social position, and dominance, as well as self-depreciating humour, often creates the fun integral to every strip.

Cowboys, circuses and cats

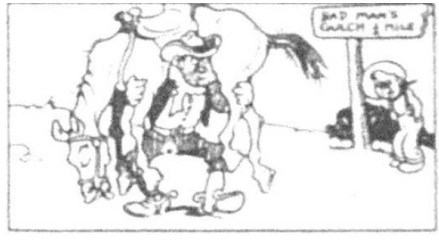

Figure 1: Desperate Dan[3]

Perhaps most emblematic of how the *Dandy* employed this irresistible desire to make fun of pomposity was the invention of Desperate Dan. Created for the first edition of the comic, the Dan strips remained a mainstay until its demise in 2012. His character combined two of the most current tropes in entertainment of the day, ones which were particularly popular with children: the circus strongman and the American cowboy. Dan's character took two types of heroism and mediated them through the British scorn for conceit. Despite his amazing strength and capabilities, Dan was laughable for his lack of common sense and foresight, and for his lack of self-awareness. The exaggerated swagger in the early frames of the strip contrasts with the ridiculousness of his carrying the horse

[3] All images are from *The Dandy* No. 1, 4th December 1937. Images are courtesy of The British Library, copyright of DC Thomson & Co Ltd.

after it collapses. The joke is enhanced by the character's obliviousness; he remains unaware that his own weight and strength is actually the cause of breaking the horse. At risk of falling prey to the very flaw I outlined earlier and over-generalising, it seems relevant to contextualise this one strip within the long running Desperate Dan weeklies which followed from it. The strips depict fanciful comic tales about an over-muscled cowboy with hair so strong he has to shave with a blowtorch. The setting in Cactusville (originally Bad Man's Gulch) conjures the Wild West but also a town which contains very British elements, such as the look of the post-boxes. The conscious acknowledgment of this discordant place again reinforces the construction of such narratives as an illusion, which both the producers and the audience recognize. The humour of the strips often rests on Dan's character being brought back to reality regarding his own limitations or inadequacies, although in the interests of humour he often comes out on top by accident. Despite being unafraid of violence, Dan is kind, helpful, and submissive to his elderly Aunt Aggie, suggesting a strong moral compass within his bow-legged, bulging body. These traits are demonstrated in this first strip by the gentle way in which he carries the exhausted horse (Figure 1). The strip is intentionally ludicrous. He fails to punch the horse dealer and instead strikes the tree which instantly, in true slapstick style, breaks in two. The action of the punch is slowed down over two panels (Figure 2). In the first, the horse dealer tries to talk Dan out of a fight, slowing the pace. The long text amplifies the tension and silliness of the exchange. In the second panel the horse dealer dodges the blow simply by bending forward. The obvious clumsiness of his posture suggests that Dan's reactions, although powerful, are rather slow. The lack of momentum in these frames undermines any sense of real aggression, making them stylised and humorous rather than truly violent. Dan's potential for any arrogance or heroism regarding his strength is destabilised by his slowness, both physical and mental, and his consequent failure. The popularity of a character like Desperate Dan is not contingent on his superhuman qualities but rather, as revealed through this first strip, because of his strong sense of justice and his flawed humanity. In such a comic construction, the expected mythological heroism of both circus strongmen and cowboys is first borrowed and then undermined, replaced with a more prosaic reality.

Figure 2: Desperate Dan and the Horse Trader

Of the twenty-five stories offered by the very first edition of *Dandy*, references to circus and spectacle types of performance were present in eight of them, ranging from ventriloquism and magic tricks to horseback riding. Only three made explicit reference to cowboys and only Desperate Dan made fun of the cowboy genre, nonetheless Dan endured, becoming the longest running strip (along with Korky the Cat) in the lifetime of the comic.

Undermining swagger was a consistently important theme in these comics, often explored through a tension between those who bully and those who are bullied. Of the stories in *Dandy* No. 1, thirteen are explicitly about the underdog character overcoming or outwitting a more powerful figure of some sort, resulting in laughter which shares the success of the little guy. This interplay of power dynamics was relevant not only to children, who were relatively powerless in the adult society of the day, but also to the wider population whose majority lived within the constraints of class, status, and economic divisions. Laughing at these constructs and restrictions was a major foundation of popular entertainment at the time. Unlike the American upwardly mobile aspirations, the mass population of Britain used humour, through caricature, slapstick, and clowning, to reinforce a unified acceptance of the status-quo; acknowledging a shared experience of subjugation and rather encouraging camaraderie through laughter.

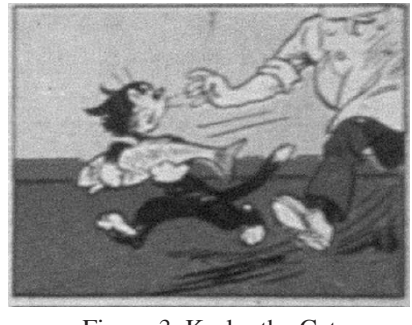

Figure 3. Korky the Cat

These comics offer many examples of the experience of the underdog teasing, tricking, or making a fool of those who assume power or authority, or of those who consider themselves more worthy than others. While Desperate Dan plays on the popularity of the hero genre, the newly created character for the cover strip drew from another, very familiar icon of popular culture. Korky the Cat would continue to grace the weekly comic's front cover for almost 47 years, despite not being a very original character at all. In 1937, the familiar feline, anthropomorphic, bipedal form and distinctive black and white was reminiscent of "Felix the Cat" from the silent movies of the 1920s, and equally similar to the more modern, eternally destructive cat from "Tom and Jerry." The silence of the Korky strips seems a nod specifically to the heritage of silent movies. The clear block style of colour was striking and intentionally eye-catching, contrasting strongly with the black and white of the cat character. As a symbolic, optimistic "fool," typifying the slapstick form, Korky was driven by simplistic and instinctive desires such as hunger. Scale and proportion are used for comic effect, exaggerating the intentions and the fun. In this first strip for example, the action is driven by the cat's desire for a chef's large fish which is drawn so large that the body appears almost as big as Korky's. A first failed attempt to steal it from the chef provokes Korky to enact an ingenious slight-of-hand in order to escape with his spoils unnoticed. The perspective is strongly from the smart cat's point of view; he takes the reader along with him in order that we enjoy the joke together. His short stature identifies him closely with a child reader. The humour lies in the satisfaction of outsmarting someone more powerful. For the joke to work the power dynamics within the relationships are important, the panels need to build this interactional quality sufficiently strongly and quickly. In the third panel for example (Figure 3), we see that although Korky runs like a human, on two legs, the comparative overpowering physicality of the chef is exaggerated by the line of sight. Even from the cat's upright position, he has to look up at a steep angle towards the chef's face, which is hidden from the reader's view because it is much higher than the top of the panel. This framing focuses attention on Korky's experience of the moment. The exaggerated chef's body, seeming so close, looming large, positions the reader alongside Korky in perspective. Additionally, the use of motion lines to suggest the speed at which they are running enhances the chef's power. His superiority, through physical size and authority in the kitchen, leads Korky to lose the fish initially. Korky's intelligent act, swapping out the fresh fish with the old, allows his deception to go unnoticed, enabling him to get away with his theft. It is not however, the act of winning the fish which enforces

the feeling of success within the strip, but rather the undermining of the authoritative chef, culminating in the final panel. In replacing the fresh fish with the old, the chef's work to produce a quality meal for the restaurant becomes an inevitable failure. It is the shared knowingness, of the child reader and the character both being in on the joke, while the adults are oblivious, which makes the laughter uniting. This notion is embellished as, in many of the panels we see Korky side on, as though we are alongside him in his trouble making. If we contrast this perspective with the "Hungry Horace" strip from the same comic, despite being about a child rather than a cat, which might encourage identification, Horace's greediness makes him an unlikable character, rather an object of laughter. This distinction is exaggerated by the reader's perspective; not as an accomplice looking from beside the character, but rather as a detached audience. His outlandish physicality suggests clumsiness and a lack of coordination when compared with the ease of movement which depicts Korky (Figure 4). The text further positions Horace as a single-minded, rather than ingenious, character. Whilst the Korky strip allows the reader to join in on the prank, encouraging us to follow the thoughts and the plan as we "see" his idea along with him, path lines guiding us from Korky's eyes to the display case, Horace speaks in an obvious way, telling us superfluously what he is literally doing, adding further linguistic clumsiness to his character. The Horace strip offers a different kind of uniting laughter. Both stories offer poetic justice, but rather than laughing at the limiting adult behaviour as in the Korky strip, in the Horace strip we laugh at the child's lack of foresight and enjoy his comeuppance as retribution for his selfishness.

Figure 4: Hungry Horace

Justice is important to the enjoyment of the comic. Five of the stories share the central motif of a character—who considers themselves above others—getting their comeuppance. For example, just as Desperate Dan's pride is rewarded by failure, Hungry Horace's greed and action of hiding food from others results in him getting nothing. Barney Boko's

audacity in trying to sneak into the circus without paying leads to his being punished painfully. Keyhole Kate's nosiness gets her into trouble for making a fool of her uncle. Kate is reprimanded physically with a spanking, however the final panel only shows this punishment taking place from a distance and in shadow. The focus of the panel is on her cousin Cuthbert and his clever parrot relishing their successful trickery, rather than on Kate's chastisement for her tendency to tell tales. In spite of their moralistic tone, the focus of these strips is on laughter and entertainment, not education. Notably the moralising messages often discourage individualistic behaviour and promote a powerful sense of justice and fairness enforced through ridiculousness and fantasy and, of course, no one actually gets hurt.

Not just a fairy story

Figure 5: Invisible Dick

Fantasy as an appropriate and desirable entertainment for children has a long, well-established heritage in which fairy tales are perhaps the most familiar. Pantomime developed from music hall. These annual extravaganzas loosely told fairy stories through a plethora of updated characters, special effects, and contemporary social commentary. This was magical entertainment for both adults and youngsters. Similar contemporising of myths and magic was utilised by the *Dandy* comic

strips. Wonder, as embodied by talking animals or talking with animals, is evident in eight of the stories in the comic. "Jimmy and His Grockle," as one example, is the story of a boy whose magic egg hatches into a pet dragon. Magic is explicitly used or referred to in three of the stories in this specific comic, such as in "Invisible Dick," where a boy's bottle of magic scent allows him to become invisible. Although a child, he is empowered by the secret he possesses. Such characters are able to master the complicated and hostile world around them through the advantage of magic. In keeping with the trope of justice, Dick uses his new-found magical potion to enact revenge on a policeman, Peeler the Cop, condemned for being a "proper rotter." The picture story (Figure 5) uses a shaded outline of the boy's character to show that he is still there, although invisible, allowing the reader to share in the progression of his taunts and trickery. Even the postscript following the story speaks directly to the reader, "If you were invisible, just what would you do? You'd do tricks that were tricky, and comic tricks, too." Openly addressing the reader in this way was a powerful technique in these early comics. Although this was not an original device, perhaps *Dandy* utilised it to a greater extent than other comics had before, because speaking to the child was in keeping with the conspiratorial, anti-adult tone of the comic. It was a method for promoting a sense of participation and unity echoing the collectivism of popular culture as familiar from music hall. Here, however, the unity was not within a social class, but rather between children, working to construct a fused identity between young consumers in opposition to the misuse of adult authority. It consciously emphasised the tensions of the time, where the space of childhood was increasingly becoming an empowered and independent position in a way it had never been before.

In all, sixteen of the twenty-five stories in this comic play with this David and Goliath trope; younger, smaller or weaker characters standing up to and overcoming figures of authority or power, whether due to age, physical strength, or social position. I am listing a few of the stories here in order to offer a sense of the variety of ways in which the same trope is interpreted within this one comic. Jimmy, supported by his newly hatched Grockle, faces up to and defeats a bully with the advantage of surprise. "The Tricks of Tommy," a text story, recounts the tale of a ventriloquist boy able to use his powers to outsmart "the most hated man in town." The picture story, "The Daring Deeds of Buck Wilson" (Figure 6), is perhaps the least humorous and most traditionally "adventure"-oriented strip in the anthology. The heroic cowboy fights a bear (who gets shot in the mouth), in order for a young boy to be safely returned to his family. While being taken for a walk in his pram, the clever baby character of

Sammy (Figure 7), uses a catapult to knock all the hats off a group of men, and, with his sister's complicity, gets away with it.

—8—With a great roar of rage and pain the grizzly rose on its hind legs and rushed out of the cave. The rope had swung Buck outwards, and the bear came after him with gleaming fangs and flashing claws. Quick as lightning Buck dropped his stick, drew his right-hand gun, and fired twice, right between those gaping jaws. Crack! Crack! And the thunder of the shots mingled with the wild roar of the grizzly monster.

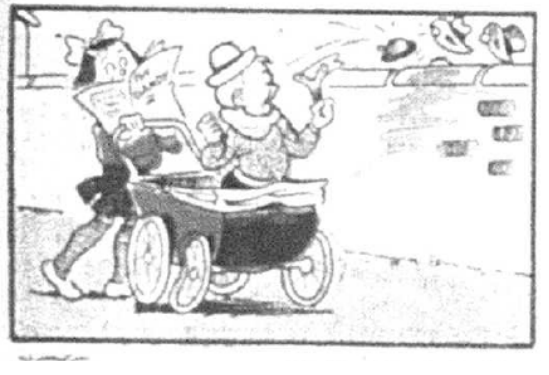

Figure 6: The Daring Deeds of Buck Wilson
Figure 7: Sammy and His Sister

From reality to respite

Just as the comics spoke to a collective readership of young people, groups and gangs of children offered important models of fellowship in the comics. The story with perhaps the "wildest" children, with an entire lack of adult supervision, was not an original creation for the *Dandy*. It rather drew on an already popular device familiar to magazines such as *Film Fun*. Characters from cinema were turned into strips, playing on their reputations and perhaps evoking the excitement in cheap print of the film-going experience. "Our Gang" was exported from the Hal Roach short films about a gang of street kids renowned for creating chaos and eliciting laughter. The strapline acknowledges this origin, stating that "these boys and girls […] appear here by courtesy of M-G-M." These strips, although humorous, were grounded in the realities of working-class children's experiences. The action starts with the gang not knowing what to do with their free time. Children hanging about, able to dedicate themselves to what they choose, was still a relative novelty in the 1930s. In this strip, the gang decide to club together and build a horse-drawn fire engine. Three panels of the story illustrate the energy and industriousness of the characters. They find materials, hammers and saws, and work together in order to finish the project without any adult assistance or supervision. The following four panels, quite an extended sequence within a short strip, show the fire truck driving about the town whilst the characters are not really sure what to do with it. This device mimics humorous performance, where the build-up towards expectation and excitement is deferred, put on hold by something unexpected, offering space to further ramp up tension before the ultimate climax of the sequence. Finally, they get the "good news" that someone has spotted a fire for them to put out. Pulling their fire truck into action, and demonstrating that it works well, they nearly drown two tramps trying to cook a chicken over an open fire. Despite this seemingly unheroic let-down, in comparison to the ideal of a daring rescue, the gang inadvertently capture two wanted criminals and the pleased police offer them a reward of "puffs and pies and pastries galore." Food as the greatest possible recompense was and remained very common in the comics, whist hunger persisted as a very real experience for many of the working-class readers. Accidental success as a result of their efforts brings to the gang in the strip, and so to the reader, a greater sense of satisfaction, as they were not striving for reward but simply for entertainment.

Paul Maloney's 2016 *The Britannia Panopticon Music Hall and Cosmopolitan Entertainment Culture* argues for the pertinence of looking again at the role that power, performance, and spectacle have played in amusement history in light of what he calls, a "new appreciation of the depth and complexity of cultural negotiation afforded by music hall" (Maloney 7). He argues that historians have overlooked the expansion and resurgence of various other, both new and traditional, entertainments of the time. This includes fairground attractions, battle re-enactments, zoos, traditional fairs, and exhibitions offering "proto-theme park experience" (Maloney 166). With Maloney's "cultural negotiation" in mind, this article has attempted to embrace the multiplicity of influences and ideologies presented within just one edition of one specific children's comic, using it as a singular illustrative example of how comics share the richness and conflict of other popular amusements. Recognising the interplay of influences draws attention to the problematic nature of reading these cultural documents because of the entwined nature of their genesis. Martin Barker's seminal work on *Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics* (1990) identified the study of comic strips as "abstract bits from the whole narrative," arguing that reading just one strip risks reaching "arbitrary interpretations" (Barker 13). Barker's solution was to use specific, focused case studies from which to extrapolate understanding, in much the same way as Groensteen. This article has adopted such a case-study approach taking the first edition of DC Thomson's *Dandy* comic from 4 December 1937. This analysis is an attempt to study an anthology comic as one whole publication. Like spraying mist on a spiders web, this inquiry has tried to illuminate and trace the sophistication of the elaborate mesh of ideas and influences relevant to the genesis of the characters and strips in *Dandy* No. 1. In light of all of the contextualised relationships and allusions, this examination has sought to fully appreciate how the comic exploits joyful variety. The *Dandy* remained a popular children's comics from 1937 until 2012. In consideration of this, such scrutiny of a single comic can only be one utterance in a much longer conversation. Therefore, this exploration is to be considered more like a prologue than a curtain call, a first edition rather than a series finale.

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As a PhD researcher for the European (ERC) project Children in Comics, Dona Pursall explores children's popular culture, aesthetics, affect and identity through the development of British 'funnies', particularly in relation to times of socio-political unrest and change. Her thesis wrangles with child readership, comics representation, and the ways in which humorous comics can be studied. She has most recently published on themes of naughtiness, friendship, compassion and eco-citizenship.