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THE COMICS WAR

John R. Cavanagh

The author has been engaged in medical education and practice since 1930. He has been Associate Clinical Professor of Medicine in Georgetown University since 1935. In August, 1941, he became Lt. Commander in the U.S. Naval Reserve (MC) and Commander in July, 1945. He is now Senior Medical Officer and Psychiatrist in the U.S. Naval Disciplinary Barracks, Portsmouth, N.H.

The author says of the present article: "The opinions and assertions contained herein are the private ones of the writer and are not to be construed as official or as reflecting the views of the Navy Department or of the Naval Service at large."—EDITOR.

Pity the poor parents perturbed by the profound proclamations of psychiatrists and psychologists (and many others) concerning the menace to their children from reading the "Comics"! They cannot see the harm themselves, in fact the daily comic book session comes as a welcome relief from the children's usual turbulence. However, trained as we are from childhood to accept the authority of science, such a paragraph as this one written by Agatha Shea¹ must be very disconcerting.

"Every now and then, when tragedy enters into the life of some boy or girl, investigation leads back to the youth's reading of the comic books, and their incitement to crime and the community is, for the time being, alerted to the daily menace to our children. Sometimes our cities are moved to take legal action against the publishers and purveyors of this unfit reading matter for children, but at its best such action is necessarily slow and not always immediately effective. In the meantime children continue to buy and read these crime and sex ridden booklets, and the home too often pays little heed until one of its own boys or girls become the victim or perpetrator of a crime. I have talked with hundreds of Chicago parents on this subject and find them all gravely concerned. They point out, and rightly, that banning unsuitable comic magazines from the home only means outside reading and borrowing with perhaps a little added excitement in the circumventing of authority. What then can be done about this ever present problem? Must parents sit with folded hands while their children's morals and ideals are broken and a perverted view of life is left on impressionable minds?"

Such statements are doubly disturbing to parents who have so recently read a well thought out article in *Child Study*, a journal which they have always considered authoritative in its field, which stated unequivocally: "There is no competent evidence that reading about crime makes criminals. The motivation towards unsocial acts lies much deeper than any casual contact with ideas printed on a page."

Again, may I repeat, pity the poor parent! He is bombarded daily with a prolific literature on this subject which is almost

¹ "What are your Children Reading?" Book Bulletin of the Chicago Public Library: Nov., 1948, 163-164.

completely bereft of logic and facts but replete with questions and exclamation marks. Little factual evidence has been produced that the comics are harmful. A small number of cases have been produced in which comic book reading has preceded or accompanied the commission of a crime. Actually, does this prove anything? This is the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* form of argumentation which even the freshman student of dialectics has learned is a fallacious one. If it is true as we are told, that 40,000,000 comic books circulate each month and that each one has several readers, should not their harmful effects, if any, be more evident? Emotionalism sells better than intellectualism, and makes better copy.

There is no need to prove that the comics are popular. This fact is already known. How popular they are is little short of amazing. There is no question but that they are big business today. It is difficult at first to grasp the fact that a reliable source indicates that in 1946 the monthly circulation was 40,000,000. This is especially remarkable when we realize that the first of the modern comic books was published in 1933. It is further estimated that each comic book is read by several people and that 75 per cent of all comic books are purchased by children out of their own funds—an outlay of \$300,000 a month or \$3,600,000 per year.

While we are on the statistical angle of the subject I should like to present just a few more figures, derived from Waugh's book entitled "The Comics", an excellent history of the comic book from its beginning to the present day.

(1) Between the ages of 6 and 11, 95 per cent of boys and 91 per cent of girls buy comics as a steady diet.

(2) Between the ages of 12 and 17, 87 per cent of boys and 81 per cent of girls use comics regularly.

(3) Between the ages of 18 and 30, 41 per cent of men and 28 per cent of women retain their interest.

(4) After the age of 30, 16 per cent of men and 12 per cent of women read them.

(5) During World War II, the *combined sales of Life, Readers Digest, and The Saturday Evening Post* were exceeded by the comic books by a ratio of 10-1.

If the comics are as bad as we hear they are, something should be done about them. What we need, however, are fewer exclamations and more facts. Up to the present there have been more references to the harmful effects of the comics in the popular press than in the professional literature. So far we have been in the position of scooping the water out of the tub with a cup to keep it from overflowing rather than turning off

the water. My plea is to investigate first why children like comics and secondly to determine, if possible, how harmful they really are.

It is good medical practice to seek the cause of the disease before attempting a cure and it is good teaching practice to begin where the children are. I should like, therefore, to offer an explanation of the psychodynamics of a child's interest in the comics. Waugh² has a simple explanation for this which has much truth in it. He states: "Then to a child, the comic book goes directly at the business of satisfying you in the most sensible possible manner. No long-winded introduction—the action starts right off—and that's what you want, you want things to happen very fast, and, of course, in pictures where you can see it all; and then they are in bright, gay colors, not like the silly, gray newspapers grown-ups read." Unfortunately the full explanation is probably not so simple.

For those who are unfamiliar with the psychodynamics of aggression and phantasy, I should like to review briefly some of the facts concerning them before proceeding further.

Aggression

Aggression has been defined as a primary human characteristic necessary for survival in the struggle for existence. There is a tendency, even among those who should know better, to confuse this term with other words of similar meanings such as hostility, hate and sadism. These terms are not synonymous with aggression and should be distinguished from it. Hostility means a feeling of ill-will or enmity. Sadism is the derivation of pleasure from the infliction of pain on another person of the opposite sex, and hate is a feeling of intense aversion. On the other hand, aggression is sometimes an expression of anger and, depending on the milieu, it may manifest itself in more than one way. For example, it may show itself clinically merely as self assertion, or as an attempt to destroy the object or person who is the cause of the aggression or who has deprived the subject of something or who has something he wants. This sounds like a dangerous and undesirable trait to possess, but as indicated in the definition, it is universal among us. In its socialized form it is seen in the competition of athletics or business. This trait is so important and universal that many have considered that it is inborn—an instinct as important and as essential as the better known instinct of self preservation. Recent investigators are more inclined to view it as an acquired char-

² Waugh, Colton: "The Comics." The Macmillan Co., N.Y., 1947.

acteristic in spite of its universality. As an acquired trait aggression may arise from one of several possible causes the most important of which is unquestionably frustration. Other common causes are insecurity and feelings of inferiority. If frustration is an important cause of aggression its presence in children is readily understood because childhood consists of a series of frustrations of greater or less degrees. We should bear in mind that aggression may be a response not only to actual but anticipated frustration. The wide distribution of aggression is attested by Symonds³ who states: "Frustration is universal and so far as frustration is necessary, aggression, as a response to it, is equally necessary . . . When a mother asks 'Is it necessary for my child to be aggressive, to be impolite to other children, to insist on having his own way' one can only answer that these tendencies are not only common and universal, but, in fact, necessary and inherent".

It is obvious that we cannot, or at least should not overtly display our aggression (desire to attack or destroy). Such expression is definitely frowned on in our present stage of civilization and the mature adult attempts to disguise or suppress any emotional expression. Even children who are more forthright in the expression of their feelings recognize the necessity of disguising their aggression because of the inevitable punishment which would follow its expression. Each age, however, has its own favorite method of showing displeasure with the way things are going. The small child may scream, cry, hit, bite or have a temper tantrum, the child in school may refuse to eat, get poor marks, destroy property, be insubordinate or insolent. The adolescent may steal, tease, swear or be sarcastic. Each age has its favorite method of expression but they all mean the same, *viz.* anger against someone or something. Spanking is an aggressive act on the part of the parent against the child. As pointed out before not all aggressive behavior is anti-social behavior. It may be sublimated in many ways and show itself in a socially acceptable form in contests both scholastic and athletic. All business contacts are of a similar nature. Our aggressive feelings may be sublimated in a variety of ways.

All children are subjected to frustrations. Ideally a child's frustrations should be repeated and small. This is the essence of good child training. Such repeated small exposures are not likely to build up a larger store of aggression than the child is able to manage through his normal outlets, as during play or

³ Symonds, Percival M.: "The Dynamics of Human Adjustment." D. Appleton-Century Co., N.Y., 1946.

other competition. It is only when a child's aggressive tendencies become greater than he can handle that it is likely to result in fear and anxiety on his part and may then manifest itself in antisocial behavior or in a neurosis.

The above discussion may be summarized thus: (a) Aggression results from frustration, insecurity and feelings of inferiority and is universal in children. (b) The usual outlet for this feeling is in rough aggressive play or in misbehavior. (c) In some cases, unless aggression is drained off, it may pile up and result in a neurosis or gravely anti-social behavior.

Phantasy

Before drawing any conclusions from the above discussion I would like to take up another phase of the child's psychological existence. This is his phantasy life. Phantasy, or as it is better known, day-dreaming, is a normal phase of the child's development. It has been defined as the mental anticipation or *substitute* for the actual fulfillment of a wish. It serves many useful purposes during the child's period of development in giving him substitute satisfaction for his thwarted desires, in giving him relief from the pressure and painfulness of reality, and it serves also as a defense against unacceptable behavior. He is, by this means, able to escape from the guilt which he would otherwise develop from any overt misbehavior by phantasing the situation in the role of a spectator. For those who have repressed their own childhood phantasies it may be well to emphasize that the daydreams of children and adolescents are consistently filled with episodes of crime, violence and death or such erotic trends as love and marriage. Punishment and cruelty play a large part in their phantasies. These thoughts have been present in the minds of children since history began. The comic books do not place them there.

Phantasy and play acting are a normal phase of the child's development and it is only when the daydreams are based on anxiety that they tend to be exaggerated and may be carried over into overt activity. Phantasy becomes harmful when it serves as a means of escape from reality and thus becomes an end in itself. For example, if an adolescent would rather day-dream about having a date than to actually have one, it is pathological.

Summary of Psychodynamics

It is apparent, therefore, that the normal aggressive reactions find release in the phantasies stimulated by the comic books which thus become the means by which children are able to work

off their hostility towards their parents and others without the development of guilt which they might otherwise feel. They may thus displace onto the characters in the comic books the aggression which would otherwise be too dangerous to show overtly or even to imagine. Many have commented on the quieting effect of the comics, the "marijuana of the nursery", usually in the belief that this is harmful. It seems more likely that the child is merely projecting himself into the story and releasing his aggression in the realm of phantasy rather than finding it necessary to be noisy, troublesome or to indulge in other overt aggressive behavior. For the normal child such conduct is not harmful or detrimental. For the neurotic child it could be detrimental but not necessarily so, and in any case he will be equally harmed by the radio or movies.

Another element which probably contributes to a child's interest in the comics is the Gestalt factor. This refers to the fact that we normally view things as wholes. Adults more readily grasp the full meaning of written words because they have more associations to each word as a result of their experiences than a child could possibly have. A child reads a sentence and frequently fails to grasp the full meaning because the finer shades of meaning escape him. All of us, even to the present day, prefer books with pictures. We like to see the author's concept of the hero or heroine; we like maps which help us to follow the action. The child likes pictures which help him to grasp the meaning of the words, to give him a better Gestalt—a better view of the whole meaning. Educators might learn a lesson from this for the higher grades. We already teach children to read by showing them the pictures which represent the word they are learning.

Objectionable Comics

The prevalent attitude seems to be that all comics are objectionable. This is certainly not the case, and if you read the "fine print" almost everyone who writes about the comics admits this. Unfortunately, the average reader is not concerned with the ordinary, work-a-day writings. His attention must be caught and retained. If it is not, many of our daily article writers will be out of work. So, in order to retain an audience it is necessary to highlight the unusual, the bizarre, the sensuous, the anxiety producing factors. The facts are there, but the usual, the ordinary have slight sales value and consequently must be softened in the interest of the stimulating, unusual items.

There are comics which are undesirable. These are in the minority. The group known collectively as "jungle adventure comics" typify this class. Within the group all of the features are displayed which have been considered objectionable. Here are found the scantily clad females, the chained females and the sexually suggestive situations which are the comics' most objectionable feature. However, such pictures and situations become significant principally when viewed through the repressions of the viewer and seem to arouse little anxiety in the well adjusted reader.

Conclusions.

From the tone of this paper it might be concluded that the writer is attempting to prepare a "White Paper" for the comics. This is not the case. He is merely suggesting that we stop trying to hold back the tide with emotionalism and that we approach the problem realistically. The arguments being so vigorously vocalized against the comics are the same ones used against the movies in their early days. Fortunately the movies are still with us and play an important part in education. The more we write about these "sex ridden" booklets the more adults are going to purchase them. Actually they are not as salacious as many writers would have us believe. Young children, contrasted with mature folk, are not interested in sex as suggested by posture and scanty clothing. The comic book publishers, being business men, give their public what it wants.

I should like to digress for a moment to suggest that some of the vehemence against the comics is aroused in those adults who have trouble in handling their own aggressiveness and whose conscious or unconscious conflicts are stirred into action by what they see there. Be that as it may, parents who develop a distaste for comic books for whatever reason, are not helping their children to deal with them in a realistic manner. It would be much better if they inquired into them, find out what their children like about them and why they find them so absorbing. Any undesirable comics would disappear off the news stand if parents took sufficient interest to look over the comics their children read and to direct their reading.

I conclude these remarks with the following observations:

(a) No one has conclusively demonstrated that the comic books are detrimental in any way.

(b) Campaigns to eliminate them are useless and serve only to release the aggressive feeling of the crusaders.

(c) No normal child under the age of 12 is likely to be harmed by them. Neurotic children need treatment and would be equally affected by the movies or the radio.

(d) Normal adolescents may be harmed by certain types of comics especially the "jungle adventure" type.

(e) Parents are the best judges of what their children should read. If parents supervise their children's reading of comics the undesirable ones would soon disappear.

(f) The argument that children waste time on the comics, which could be better spent needs further study.

(g) More study should be devoted to eliciting the facts about the comics.

(h) There will always be objections to everything but most of the objectionable features of the comics would be remedied if the publishers would adhere to a few simple rules among which I would like to suggest:

(1) Law enforcement officers should not be made to look ridiculous or silly.

(2) Omit references to petty crimes or crimes committed against or by children.

(3) Omit pictures of scantily clad women, of women being tortured by men or of chained women.

(4) The cover of the book should reflect its contents.