Précis

The purpose of this essay is to dispel any misconceptions of postmodern art, more specifically, Bill Watterson’s *Calvin and Hobbes*. I argue that Postmodernism does not ridicule or dismiss modern art and its concepts, rather it serves to eradicate the distinguishing line between “high” art and “low” art. Watterson’s work is an exemplary testament to the purpose of Postmodernism. Postmodernism opposes Modern conceptions of art as profound, deeply meaningful or intellectual by parodying its predecessors. Postmodernists have often been criticized for their humorous and satirical nature, but to dismiss them as unserious artists who make no statement at all would be an enormous oversight of their achievement. Watterson has given art and its appreciators permission to allow art to be a statement in itself and nothing more. As Postmodernism still struggles to gain a complete and absolute definition, it would be important to consider Watterson’s *Calvin and Hobbes* as a part of that achievement for the 21st century artists to reflect and learn from—a fusion of literature and illustration combined.

Given the body of work that Watterson has created, it would be impossible to cover all grounds. I focus mainly on the author and the two main characters. I compare and contrast Modernism and Postmodernism, and distinguish the differences as shown in *Calvin and Hobbes*—a medium that involves both illustration and literature. Seeing as how Postmodernism depends heavily on the concept of appropriation, the reader will have a more rich experience and understanding when viewing the strips with at least some working knowledge in philosophy, literature, and art, even at the most superficial level. In fact, a superficial understanding of all three subjects is all that is necessary to understand the gist of postmodern art because the object of postmodernists is precisely
that: shallow understanding. I expound on certain references or allusions that Watterson makes throughout the strip by explanation of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century modern concepts and philosophies. Although the bulk of \textit{Calvin and Hobbes} is humorous, it is not to be taken as a completely unserious work that just serves to amuse readers; it covers an array of topics ranging from criticisms of America’s laziness and insatiable consumerism to problems regarding environmental issues. Watterson satirizes parenting and public education, and paints an accurate illustration of what it’s like to be a six-year-old, which is not always sweet and charming as people may assume it to be. Some strips are starkly realistic and heavy. But this is also partially what contributes to Watterson’s success as an artist—his ability to weave in serious topics into his largely humorous body of work. This adds to the richness and complexity of his art.

I believe Watterson’s \textit{Calvin and Hobbes} is and will be considered one of the most significant postmodern art forms of our time. My decision to write this essay was motivated by none other than my strong regard for Watterson’s work and my admiration for him as an artist—a rare and genuine one for our generation. The process of writing this has given me the opportunity to delve into the work more deeply as well as broaden my understanding of postmodern art and its purpose.
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According to Lauren Clark of Washington State University, Postmodernism was a reaction against Modernism and its ideals; the severely intellectual basis that modern art and literature contended for caused the following generation of artists to wonder “if everything had [already] been thought, made, and done” (“Your Guide to Postmodernism”). Postmodernists rebelled against modern art by creating “works of art that could just be, instead of needing to represent a greater or more important idea. Because of this shift in focus from the subjective toward the objective, a major defining factor of Postmodernism is appropriation” (“Your Guide to Postmodernism”). Postmodernists applied previous works and concepts onto their own art, “and would imply no deeper meaning to the new piece of work than what was visible on the surface. The question that was presented by Postmodernists is whether there is anything to truly be gained from the vast subjectivity, finding meaning in all things, which had been so common during Modernist times” (“Your Guide to Postmodernism”).

Appropriation is applied throughout American cartoonist Bill Watterson’s Calvin and Hobbes. The comic strip, which was syndicated in newspapers around the world from 1989 through 1995, has numerous references and allusions to major art forms from the past as well as intellectual movements in literature and philosophy. It can easily be argued that Watterson’s comic strip is a major postmodern achievement that brings together the medium of writing together with illustration. There is a coming together of art, literature, philosophy and the media all at once through Calvin and Hobbes. However, not everyone is fond of Postmodernism. Scholar Terry Eagleton criticizes Postmodernism particularly harshly for its “depthless, styleless, dehistoricized, decathedced surfaces” (qtd. in “Avant-garde/Modernism/Postmodernism,” Geoffrey
Kantaris). This essay will study Watterson as a postmodern artist as well as his artistic goals through *Calvin and Hobbes*. It will also examine whether or not Eagleton’s argument holds true for Watterson’s art.

In order to demystify the underlying messages in the strips, I will examine applied concepts originating from modern art and literature. As a means of examining each character for an in-depth analysis and modern concepts in relation to postmodern concepts, I will deconstruct then compare Calvin and Hobbes to Beckett’s characters in his modern play “Waiting for Godot.” I will also identify influences of modern art, philosophy, and literature throughout, seeing as they are very present in Watterson’s work. My understanding is that Watterson’s reason for satirizing Modern accomplishments in literature, art, and philosophy is the same for his reason to refuse licensing his characters for merchandized goods; art isn’t and shouldn’t be anything more than what it is in form. Not everything needs to have depth and profundity, but it certainly shouldn’t be trivialized either, reduced to bare and insignificant elements through commercialization.

According to Sarah Lawall et al in “The Twentieth Century: Modernisms and Modernity,” “[by] the end of the [20th] century, contemporary writers continued to profit from modernists’ innovations in language and perspective at the same time that they found different ways to articulate the world of *their* experience. Modernism, as an exploration of literary and linguistic forms employed to express the twentieth century’s ongoing interrogation of reality, continued to exert its influence throughout the century and to change the contexts of modern experience” (1626). The main purpose of this paper is to analyze how Watterson work “exerts” modern influence through the fusion of words
and illustration. Examples of Watterson’s strip will be provided as necessary. As R.C. Harvey explains in *Comics Journal*, “Watterson draws comic strips the way they should be drawn… Much of his humor lies in the pictures. And in many of the individual strips, the words alone make no sense at all without the pictures” (qtd. in “Sidelights,” 5). For a type of medium where the author’s intentions are inherent in the illustrations, the work must be evaluated as a whole—pictures and words combined. Examples of his strip will be shown throughout. The purpose of this is to enhance readers’ appreciation for Watterson’s humor and his own artistic philosophy presented by America’s beloved characters.

**Bill Watterson: Cartoonist with the Responsibility of an Artist**

According to “Sidelights,” Watterson was born in Washington, D.C. in 1958, and was raised in Chagrin Falls, Ohio since the age of 6, where he spent his childhood reading cartoons such as “Peanuts,” “Krazy Kat” and “Pogo.” Motivated by the dream of wanting to become a cartoonist at a very young age, Watterson drew cartoons for his high school newspaper and yearbook. He graduated from Kenyon College in 1980 with a degree in political science, and began working as a political cartoonist at the Cincinnati Post shortly after. This did not last, and he began pitching several strip ideas to syndicates around him. Watterson’s idea about a six year old boy and his tiger friend was considered by United Features Press, but upon development, they changed their mind and offered him a job on the character “Robotman,” which was created solely for the purpose of merchandising. But Watterson was uncomfortable with the idea of working on someone else’s character, let alone one that relied on the press’s intention to merchandise.
commercial items. On November 18, 1985, by way of Universal Press Syndicate, Calvin and Hobbes was officially introduced to the world (“Sidelights,” 3).

Watterson’s conviction on what it means to be an artist and the responsibility that comes with it to himself and his work remained with him throughout his career. These ideas eventually made their way into Calvin and Hobbes strips, and Watterson held a steadfast position, enduring many battles to protect his characters from losing the quality that gave them life. Watterson’s biggest challenge was preventing his characters from becoming merchandised:

“During my fight to prevent Calvin and Hobbes from being turned into licensed merchandise, I was accused of having a black-and-white view of the issue. The arguing dragged on for years and was very frustrating and unpleasant, so it was a bit of a release to get an interesting strip idea out of the conflict” (Watterson, Calvin and Hobbes: Sunday Pages 1985-1995, 57).
It’s a rare sight in America today: An artist who refuses to license his products and turn down millions of dollars. The most recent example of this is Seth MacFarlane, the creator of hit television series *Family Guy*—a $2 billion dollar empire (Dean, “Seth MacFarlane’s $2 Billion Family Guy Empire,” *Fast Company Magazine*). Here is Watterson’s position on licensing from *The Calvin and Hobbes Tenth Anniversary Book*:

“First of all, I believe licensing usually cheapens the original creation. When cartoon characters appear on countless products, the public inevitably grows bored and irritated with them, and the appeal and value of the original work are diminished. Second, commercial products rarely respect how a comic strip works. A wordy, multiple-panel strip with extended conversation and developed personalities does not condense to a coffee mug illustration without great violation to the strip’s spirit. …When everything fun and magical is turned into something for sale, the strip’s world is diminished. *Calvin and Hobbes* was designed to be a comic strip and that’s all I want it to be. It’s the one place where everything works the way I intend it to” (10-11). Watterson’s main reason for being against commercializing his cartoon is “the corruption of the strip’s integrity. …When the cartoonist is trying to talk honestly and seriously about life, then I believe he has a responsibility to think beyond satisfying the market’s every whim and desire” (11). By not licensing his characters, Watterson retains control of his art and his characters and maintains his responsibility as an artist by avoiding distractions that would disrupt or ruin the integrity of his work. Furthermore, his criticism of America’s “shameless commercialism” is often a topic of his cartoon (10):
As the strip illustrates, Calvin’s piece that expresses a human being’s morbid existential horror at the meaningless of life is, as Hobbes indicates, not exactly prone to marketability. Calvin gives it some thought and resorts to a conformist piece. The strip presents an artist’s dilemma between artistic integrity versus marketability very clearly, and reveals Watterson’s awareness of the different “kinds” of artists that exist and his own philosophy behind what purpose art must achieve today: A statement on the human condition. Watterson’s criticism of the contemporary art world is also striking, which he calls a “soulless banality.” Watterson details some of the reasons for this problem as well as Calvin’s resort to conformity in his explanations of how cartooning has evolved in the last few decades.
Watterson is more than just a newspaper cartoonist who worked to meet
deadlines; he is a constant advocate of demanding less restrictions and more space in
cartoon panels, which are standardized by the newspaper and editors. Watterson explains
that since the syndication of cartoons, the added pressure of appealing to a broader
audience has forced cartoonists to make artistic compromises. According to Watterson,
“syndication has encouraged the calculated production of strips to mirror trends and
capitalize on the specific interests of desirable demographic groups. Marketing strips on a
large scale encourages comics to be conservative, easily categorized, and imitative of
previous successes. The comics have gained immense readerships and have become very
profitable this way, but at some cost to the comics’ early exuberance” (*The Calvin and
Hobbes Tenth Anniversary Book*, 8). Watterson expresses his disappointment in
syndication limiting experimenting, changing, and discovering ways to progress in
comics’ work due to fear of losing their audience and their job by not meeting marketable
standards. Watterson’s disappointment in the cartoonists’ limited abilities today is mainly
because of the crippling of art for the sake of cashing in.
Besides the author’s evident sarcasm here, what the characters say are quite significant to how Watterson views his responsibility as an artist: Calvin claims that creating and expressing his own art is his way of guarding high culture; Hobbes claims that his and Calvin’s talent come with responsibility. Watterson also believes in the artist’s responsibility to his work. Part of Watterson’s frustration with the syndication’s interference in the artist’s integrity is that it ruins the quality of the artwork with disruptions concerning demographics, broad appeal, and the issue of space. Watterson writes: “By unimaginatively imposing standardized, reduced formats on all comics, papers give the comics cost-efficient space, not graphically effective space” (*The Calvin and Hobbes Tenth Anniversary Book*, 8).
But Watterson’s strip gained such high recognition that he was able to achieve at least one triumph and breakout of corporate mandated space constraints. He explains in *Calvin and Hobbes Sunday Pages 1985-1995* that after returning from a sabbatical to resign his contract with his syndicate, he proposed a redesigned Sunday format that would “permit more panel flexibility” (15). By this time, *Calvin and Hobbes* had created quite a reputation, and the syndicate had no choice but to concede. In fact, they offered him an “unbreakable half page”; Watterson writes: “I remain convinced that the larger Sunday strip gave newspapers a better product and made the comics section more fun for readers. Comics are a visual medium” (15). Watterson readily explains the reason for this struggle: “In the newspaper business, space is money” (15). But as an artist, Watterson’s responsibility was to his art, and so he demanded space for his work. Watterson was able to create in his provided space freely, and make bold decisions to execute the vision in his mind, and bring out the liveliness in his work.
“To an editor, space may be money, but to a cartoonist, space is time. Space provides the tempo and rhythm of the strip. Used well, it directs the eye to speed up or linger. The long drawing of Hobbes walking away is a sort of visual brake. It’s empty, so the eye rests there and the panel creates a pause” (Watterson, *Calvin and Hobbes: Sunday Pages 1985-1995*, 59).

Watterson claims that “expressing something real and honest” is, for him, “the joy and importance of cartooning” (*Calvin and Hobbes: Sunday Pages 1985-1995*, 9). By not compromising to standardizations and selling out to America’s love for merchandized consumption, Watterson’s characters retain their essence and quality. Watterson explains his ideal dream for compromising business and cartooning: “The comics’ potential—as a seller of newspapers, and as an art form—is great if cartoonists will challenge themselves to create extraordinary work and if the business will work to create a sustaining environment for it” (*The Calvin and Hobbes Tenth Anniversary Book*, 9).
Calvinism of the 20th Century

In *The Calvin and Hobbes Tenth Anniversary Book*, Watterson explains that Calvin is not based on his son, as he does not have any children, nor is he a version of Watterson’s self in childhood for he was “fairly quiet and obedient” (21). Calvin’s thoughts reflect Watterson’s current perceptions and the issues, and in that sense, Calvin reflects more of Watterson’s adulthood and is the opposite of his childhood. According to Watterson, the six-year-old boy character is named after the “sixteenth century theologian who believed in predestination”—John Calvin (21). Watterson does not affirm Calvin’s belief in his own predestination, but makes several other things clear about his character: he is very opinionated and is a menace to authority figures. He also suffers from an incredibly hyperactive imagination. All of these attributes involve him in numerous conflicts with his parents, his teacher (Miss Wormwood), and peers (e.g. Susie Derkins).
From these examples, one can observe Watterson applying mid-19th century literary concepts to his comic strip. For instance, there are several aspects to Calvin’s behavior which indicate naturalism. Kevin O’Rourke writes in “Realism in Early Modern Fiction” that European naturalism relies heavily on determinism; man, as writer Emile Zola would depict, “is an animal, reacting to internal and external forces—hereditary,
environmental, sexual political, economic, and religious—that he could neither control nor understand; man [is] helpless, determined to act in predictable ways” (652). The determining factor in Calvin’s life is simply the fact that he is inexperienced. His age is what limits him. In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Watterson said, “The thing that I really enjoy about [Calvin] is that he has no sense of restraint, he doesn't have the experience yet to know the things that you shouldn't do” (qtd. “Sidelights”). Another source that influences how Calvin behaves is his belief in Santa Clause.

(Watterson, *It’s a Magical World*, 1996,152)

Watterson utilizes Calvin’s quality as a child successfully as an artist; at the tender age of six, Calvin is at a point in his life when he is curious about many things in the world. From the strips’ examples, it is obvious that Calvin is the type who prefers discussion and debate to an absolute answer:

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Grace Jung, 2009
The dynamic throughout Watterson’s strip stays lively and interesting precisely through this device. Watterson says: “I use Calvin as an outlet for my immaturity, as a way to keep myself curious about the natural world, as a way to ridicule my own obsessions, and as a way to comment on human nature” (The Calvin and Hobbes Tenth Anniversary Book, 21). Calvin’s critical testaments to the people and environment around him or life in general give readers a chance to reflect on these statements. Watterson’s way of anchoring his art to contemporary times is by sharing issues that are relevant to his nation, his readers, and their society as a whole. Calvin is the tool that channels these ideas, and Hobbes is there to respond or react.
“Whenever the strip got ponderous, I put Calvin and Hobbes in their wagon and sent them over a cliff. It had a nice way of undercutting the serious subjects, and it often doubled as a visual metaphor as well. Plus, it’s a lot more fun to draw than a series of talking heads” (Watterson, *Calvin and Hobbes: Sunday Pages 1995-1985*, 2001, 85).

Watterson’s ability to get serious topic discussions across his readers and still obtain such great popularity works is through the innocent and charming appeal of his characters. Having an old man with a beard and glasses discuss existential questions would be a lot more depressing and dull as opposed to a curious six-year-old who philosophizes while riding his red wagon or sled with his tiger friend. It is natural for a six-year-old to have many questions about his life, so there is also a pragmatic sense in this method as well. Calvin remains convincing character to the reader; he is young boy who is lively and thoughtful—qualities that can appeal to a widespread audience.
American cartoonist R. C. Harvey describes Calvin in *Comics Journal* as “entirely self-centered, devoted wholly to his own self-gratification. In pursuit of this completely understandable childhood goal, Calvin acknowledges no obstacle, no restraint. His desire and its satisfaction are all that matter to him” (qtd. in “Sidelights”). Calvin’s persona, although at times disagreeable, is in fact completely understandable. Watterson explains: “I suspect that most of us get old without growing up, and inside that every adult (sometimes not very far inside) is a bratty kid who wants everything his own way” (21). This contributes to the comic’s success. Calvin’s tantrums when he doesn’t get his way, and his qualms and questions on life and youth through philosophical discussions with Hobbes are all relatable. It is the quality that makes Calvin *human* which makes him convincing and hilarious.

What sets Calvin apart from the rest of the characters in the strip is his hyperactive imagination, which contributes largely to his creativity. It gives him the freedom to accomplish anything during the day through daydreams, although they do get the best of him at times. For instance, his time in class is mostly spent daydreaming until Miss Wormwood intrudes:

Whenever Calvin is forced to sit in class or at his desk against his wishes, he has a way of escaping the present circumstances through his imagination. Watterson draws the readers into Calvin’s strange and wondrous world successfully via trends that modern artists and writers followed in the early to mid-20th century—subjectivity.

**Modern Literature**

Woolf’s criticism of the literature of her predecessors was that it left her with “so strange a feeling of incompleteness and dissatisfaction” (Mr. Bennett, Mrs. Brown,” 105). By response, her work delivers an illustration or shape of an object or person’s essence—the part that mattered most to her. In her essay, “Modern Fiction,” Woolf dismisses the
English predecessors of literary modernists as “materialists” because their fiction is “concerned not with the spirit but with the body” (185). Woolf’s literature, by example, shifts the reader’s focus from materialist writers’ trivial external descriptions of hotel rooms, villas, carriages, luxury items, etc., to the human spirit. Her fiction is esteemed for providing readers access into her characters’ minds by depicting the world through the characters’ eyes, thereby providing multiple perspectives, moods, thoughts, and feelings rather than a single perspective and narration. The effect of this method is bringing the reader closer to the character’s experiences and circumstances. Calvin and Hobbes does this by example as well but it includes, of course, a helpful addition—a visual aid. By bringing together both a visual medium and a written medium, Watterson is able to express more precisely what the subjective reality or perspective is for all of his characters. There is no better way to allow an outsider to enter into another’s mind than through both a visual and written form. Essentially, cartooning is a meeting of these two forms.

Woolf has shown evidence of keen interest and attraction to visual art, such as painting. (For example, her sister Vanessa Bell, whom she was very close to, was a painter.) Woolf’s affinity towards painting is evident in To the Lighthouse. The painter Lily Briscoe tries to capture Mrs. Ramsay’s image—the shape of her essence—to transfer it onto a page. She wants to encapsulate her feelings of tenderness for the sights, feelings, and surrounding of her present moment but realizes that her efforts will never measure up to her ambition. Her way of justifying her feelings is through impressionist painting; in chapter IX, she sums up the image of Mrs. Ramsay reading to her son James with a purple triangle.
The significance of Watterson’s cartoons is that they are not simple or dull; both his written material and illustrations are very rich with mood and thoughtfulness. With cartooning, Watterson can let his illustrative expression expound on the written expression and vice versa; by combining the two forms, he is able to make a more precise statement.

(Watterson, *There’s Treasure Everywhere*, 1996, 92)

*Hobbes*
Hobbes is Calvin’s tiger friend, who, according to Watterson in *The Calvin and Hobbes Tenth Anniversary Book*, is named after the “seventeenth philosopher with a dim view of human nature”—Thomas Hobbes (22). Unlike Calvin, Hobbes is more aware of actions and their relation to certain consequences. Hobbes’s patient personality gives the relationship with Calvin a necessary balance. Watterson states: “Hobbes is a little more restrained, a little more knowledgeable because he has a little bit of that sense of consequence that Calvin lacks entirely. [Together, Calvin and Hobbes] are more than the sum of their parts. Each ticks because the other is around to share in the little conspiracies, or to argue and fight with... Each is funnier in contrast to the other than they would be by themselves” (qtd. in “Sidelights”).

(Watterson, *There’s Treasure Everywhere*, 78).

Hobbes often acts as Calvin’s conscience. Because Calvin has such an active imagination and impulsive personality that lead them both to so many adventures and mischief, a character that considers the possible consequences that might follow certain actions is necessary. But despite Hobbes’s suggestions on perhaps rethinking things, he never restrains Calvin from actually following through with his proposed plans. This quality distinguishes Hobbes from any parent or authority figure. Hobbes does work as a conscience to Calvin, but he never actually restricts Calvin from his pursuits, as opposed
to Calvin’s parents or teacher who actually stop him from acting out. Hobbes is the sort of friend who lets Calvin experience and learn things on his own. As Calvin’s best friend, Hobbes does not interfere with Calvin’s liberty to explore, learn and experience life’s lessons. But Hobbes does, on occasion, nudge him towards the right direction, and Calvin eventually learns a valuable lesson:

(Watterson, *The Days are Just Packed*, 158)

**Estragon and Vladimir: Calvin and Hobbes**

In 1954, Beckett created two characters who share a very similar relationship to that of Calvin and Hobbes. In his absurdist play, “Waiting for Godot,” he introduces Vladimir and Estragon—a couple of simpletons sitting beneath a willow tree, waiting for
someone named Godot. This belief that Godot will arrive and meet with them keeps the
two characters fixed at the same spot, waiting for someone who may not even come:

Estragon: Charming spot. [He turns, advances to front, halts facing auditorium.] Inspiring prospects. [He turns to Vladimir.] Let’s go.
Vladimir: We can’t.
Estragon: Why not?
Vladimir: We’re waiting for Godot.

(Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, Act 1, 29)

This last line gets repeated throughout the play. From these few lines alone, it’s apparent that Estragon is the type that grows bored and tired of the same spot very quickly, and whose natural inclination is to leave. Vladimir acts as the conscience that reminds Estragon why they cannot move: “We’re waiting for Godot.” One might ask why they’re even together: If Estragon is so restless and Vladimir is firm on his position to remain put and wait for Godot, why don’t they each separate? The two characters discuss this issue:

Estragon: [coldly] There are times when I wonder if it wouldn’t be better for us to part.
Vladimir: You wouldn’t go far.

(Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, Act 1, 39)

Vladimir’s answer is indicative of the two character’s relationship: They are stuck for better or worse. Linda Ben-Zvi, in *Twayne’s Author Series: Samuel Beckett*, distinguishes the characters:

“It is [Estragon] who has trouble with his feet, worries about food, sleeps and dreams. Of him, Beckett has said: ‘Estragon is on the ground, he belongs to the stone.’ Vladimir usually is tall and spare, his physical ailment his prostate, his
trouble his hat. Of the two he is more contemplative, the dispenser of food, the initiator of action, and of the meeting with Godot. ‘Vladimir is light, he is oriented towards the sky. He belongs to the tree,’ Beckett observed. Stone and tree become visual hieroglyphics for the pair, and their actions are skewed to their signs: the body and the mind, the earth and the sky” (1-2).

Ben-Zvi views Vladimir and Estragon’s relationship as metaphoric of the mind-body relationship. Calvin and Hobbes’s relationship also has elements that are reminiscent of Beckett’s characters and the mind-body relationship.

According to Ben-Zvi, Estragon’s physical ailments, such as getting his foot stuck in his boot, restlessness, hunger, and sleepiness, confine him to a corporeal representation. Likewise, Calvin’s ailments are also physical; he often complains that his human physique is inferior and mundane in comparison to Hobbes:


Calvin is restless, as most children are. He does anything he could to get out of doing his homework or sitting in class. He defies such restrictions by watching too much television, driving his parents crazy, or daydreaming.
Vladimir, on the other hand, representative of the mind, is always mindful not to leave. He thinks ahead unlike Estragon; he understands that if they leave the spot, they will not meet Godot. He is the reinforcement that reminds Estragon why they cannot leave. Hobbes shares similar characteristics to Vladimir: For one, Hobbes is a lot taller and lankier than Calvin, just as Vladimir is compared to Estragon. Hobbes suggests the possible consequences that Calvin might face after following through with his reckless actions. But one fundamental difference between Beckett’s characters and Watterson’s characters is that Vladimir literally stops Estragon from taking any action, such as walking away, whereas Hobbes never actually stops Calvin from any action. Hobbes may be more aware of Calvin’s actions which guarantee punitive consequences later, but he never actually restricts Calvin from pursuing his plans. Furthermore, Calvin doesn’t exactly take Hobbes’s advice either. This relationship adds to the humor and dynamic between the pair. Watterson states: “‘Each ticks because the other is around to share in the little conspiracies, or to argue and fight with.... Each is funnier in contrast to the other than they would be by themselves’” (qtd. in “Sidelights”).

There is, however, the issue of reality concerning Hobbes: Is Hobbes real?

Whenever Hobbes “comes alive” (in the sense of walking, talking, breathing, and thinking): It happens only when Calvin is alone with him. When Hobbes is not with Calvin or if a third party is present, Hobbes remains a stuffed tiger.

(Watterson, *The Days Are Just Packed*, 1993, 115)

This problem leads to what Watterson has been criticized for—the “‘so-called ‘gimmick’” concerning the reality of Hobbes (*The Calvin and Hobbes Tenth Anniversary Book*, 22). Watterson explicitly states that Hobbes does not come to life when Calvin is around by some miracle and he is not a product of Calvin’s imagination either: “The nature of Hobbes’s reality doesn’t interest me. …Calvin sees Hobbes one way, and everyone else sees Hobbes another way” (22). This claim, however, doesn’t seem to do either the strip or the reader’s understanding of Watterson’s cartoon any justice. After all, Watterson did develop Hobbes’s character, and does seem to adhere to certain rules for depicting Hobbes, which is in one of two ways: a stuffed tiger to everyone else or an actual character to Calvin. Having a method to depicting Hobbes a certain way implies that Watterson is concerned with the nature of Hobbes’s reality.
Given that Hobbes is only “real” to Calvin and a stuffed tiger to everyone else implies that Hobbes’s living existence is dependent on Calvin’s mind. Calvin’s mind acts like God’s mind by giving Hobbes a living existence, analogous to what Rene Descartes expresses in *Meditations on First Philosophy*: It is God’s mind which gives humans an independent mind and will. According to this, Watterson’s conception of Calvin and Hobbes’s relationship is radically Cartesian. However, Watterson’s reason for not specifying the logic of Hobbes’s relationship to Calvin seems to be based on the argument that it is irrelevant to the work itself.

This idea of reasons being irrelevant to the artwork itself is a very postmodern idea. For instance, when socialist-realist writers in Korea began to write in the 1920s, they reacted against didactic literature and pursued writing on the basis of an art-for-the-sake-of-art idea (O’Rourke, “Realism in Modern Fiction”). Of course, this is more of a modern element, however it is a starting point to understanding Watterson’s disinterest in the nature of Hobbes’s reality. As a postmodern artist, Watterson creates his characters by upholding the idea that the creator can pick and choose which areas he wants to give reason or meaning to and which areas he simply feels is not necessary to provide explanation. Art can be a statement itself without necessarily an explanation or reason.
Clark explains that postmodernists were not motivated by giving meaning or depth to everything in art: “The strive towards creating the avant-garde was shunned because it was believed that people were products of representations and that their creations and ideas were simply being reconstructed from old ideas” (“Your Guide to Postmodernism”). According to Clark, the public was no longer interested in searching for “meaning in everything…. …Postmodernists focused on fragmentation; the belief that one’s work is not his or her own, but an appropriated collection of the completed works of others” (“Your Guide to Postmodernism”). The example below is the epitome of this definition:
Watterson fuses Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* with the song “Feelings,” all passionately recited and sung by Calvin’s dinner. Not everything needs to have a reason or purpose. The “joy” of cartooning for Watterson is reason enough to express and explore anything in art, including the most ridiculous topics. For the above strip, Watterson says, “This is one of the weirdest strips I drew, and I’m not exactly sure I understand it myself, but it still makes me laugh, so there you are” (*Calvin and Hobbes: The Sunday Pages 1985-1995*, 2002, 79).

As modern art developed throughout the 20th century, it gave tools and possibilities for its postmodernist followers to react and experiment as Watterson has. His strip includes many elements that reflect, interpret, and echo modern concepts in
literature and art, but without always or necessarily giving a deep meaning or reason to it all. The audience can simply enjoy the pictures, dialogues, and parody that the art expresses just as the artist himself does.

**Perspective and Imagination**

Watterson’s cartoon depends heavily on the defining element of modern art and literature: the exploration of perspectives. Watterson says, “When *Calvin and Hobbes* first appeared, it was somewhat surprising to treat reality as subjective, and to draw a strip with multiple viewpoints, juxtaposing Calvin’s vision with what others saw. I did this simply as a way to put the reader in Calvin’s head and to reveal his imaginative personality” (Watterson, *Calvin and Hobbes: Sunday Pages 1985-1995*, 7). As mentioned earlier, Calvin is a daydreamer. His remarkably transcendent ability to think accredits to his keen sense of imagination, which carries him out of his present circumstances and take him to another world, offering him liberty from the constraints of the mundane world and its perfunctory activities. These visualizations also give the readers an insight into a whole other perspective.
(Watterson, *There's Treasure Everywhere*, 1996, 28)

(Watterson, *There's Treasure Everywhere*, 1996, 35)
The idea of subjective reality is strongly reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's philosophy on writing fiction: “...I ask myself, what is reality? And who are the judges of reality? A character may be real to Mr. [Arnold] Bennett and quite unreal to me” (“Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” 103). By practicing Woolf’s example, Watterson displays two types of
reality. Just because Calvin’s perceptions of the world are not necessarily the same as how the other characters view reality, it does not mean that they are any more or less real. The strange scenarios, worlds, and daydreams that Calvin conceives, as well as Hobbes’s character, are products of Calvin’s imagination and Watterson’s method of “juxtaposing Calvin’s vision with what others saw” is just a way of bringing readers into Calvin’s perceptions. Watterson’s point is well taken: Calvin’s reality is no less true than another’s. This idea is very much a product of early to mid-twentieth century art.

In his book *Irrational Man*, William Barrett mentions three aspects that constitute the testimony of modern art: The flattening out of all planes, which allows the presentation of the past and present simultaneously, the flattening out of climaxes, which rids the notion of “central importance,” and everything in the given space, both background and object, are equal (as exemplified through cubism) and the flattening out of all values, which allows large and small objects to be treated equally in value (50-56). Such aspects are expressed in modern paintings and literature. All three aspects support the value of subjectivity in art, and the point here is that one subjective point of view isn’t any more or less significant than another’s. Watterson’s treatment of Calvin’s reality as equal to the so-called “true” reality of his parents, teachers, and peers is an application of modern art’s quality.
In the above example, it’s obvious that there isn’t an actual dinosaur in the kitchen; it is understood that Calvin is imagining himself to be the Tyrannosaurus Rex, but his imagination extends into he imagines his mom’s day is like as well. The reality for his mom may simply be going to the store and getting some cold cuts, whereas Calvin’s imagination hyperbolizes the scenario into one that is suitable to his own liking. The above depiction is a perfect example of Watterson’s demonstration of subjective reality.

Modern Art and Existentialism

Philosopher Paul Tillich writes in his essay, *Existentialist Aspects of Modern Art* that “most of modern art has transformed all of reality into forms of still life” because the appreciation for idealism and organic forms has disappeared; Tillich explains that idealism in art was replaced with cubism where, “everything is dissolved into planes, lines and colors, elements of reality, but not reality itself” (4-5). Tillich refers to this
definition as “cubism”—which means, “the essence of reality is contained in these original forms” (5). Tillich attributes this breakthrough in 20th century art to the horrors of World War II, which “shows what is now in the souls of many Americans as disruptiveness, existential doubt, emptiness and meaninglessness” (5). Are traces of this anxiety dating back into the mid-twentieth century still present in contemporary art, specifically in Watterson’s art?

(Barrett, *Homicidal Psycho Jungle Cat*, 1994, 45)

Watterson understands the conditions that existentialists have left human beings to struggle with. He also realizes what Americans have invented to pass the time while they all wait out their deaths: Television. Since modern philosophers have left an open-ended solution to the problem of their existence: to freely create meaning for one’s existence and the meaning in others. In *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, Jean-Paul Sartre says: “There is no human nature, since there is no God to conceive it. …Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself” (225-238).

Barrett describes a modern artist’s perception of the world is always “dense, opaque, unintelligible” (51). The question is, what caused so much anguish in modern artists in the first place? What made them claim that idealism in paintings was unrealistic and that reality had to be presented in a completely different manner? World War I and II
exposed human beings to new kinds of trauma; with technological advances in creating weaponry, more horrific damages were made possible. Barrett claims that the “roots of our own existence” get touched upon when “this civilization of ours has at last got its hands on weapons with which…we could wake up tomorrow morning dead” (3). The idea here is that existential dread is first realized when a person faces death; these people who lived harrowing lives in the mid-twentieth century were wondering when the bomb would finally strike their heads and kill them, and so, the problem and question of human existence was posed constantly by thinkers of this era. The artists reacted to the absurdity, disorientation, and inhumanity of the war and their current state of the world through modern art.

Tillich describes the origin of Pablo Picasso’s idea behind his famous painting “Guernica”: “This place, Guernica, a small town in the country of the Basques, was completely destroyed by a combined air attack by the Italians and Germans. It was the first exercise of what is called, ‘saturation bombing,’ a terrible word. That means bombing in such a way that nothing is left” (5). So the shattered, disoriented, and disturbed images of people, objects, and animals combined in muted grays, gloomy blues, and empty whites express the nightmare and horror that these people suffered during the air raid. It also describes the absurdity and inhumanity of war.
For Watterson, cubism exemplifies his “incapacitated” state, which occurs because of the “persuasiveness of all sides” (Calvin and Hobbes: Sunday Pages 1985-1995, 2002, 51). As mentioned earlier with Barrett’s explanation, cubism is a statement to space, value and climaxes leveled out on the same equal plane. Watterson is applying the same concept on perspectives; when multiple views are all equally valid, perspective becomes “fractured.” For Watterson, a subjective perspective is necessary to see the world in “a recognizable order.” Watterson is redefining cubism by interpreting the modern art concept as one that illustrates a state that occurs when multiple views share equal validity.

Tillich defines existentialism as
“the attempt of man to describe his existence and its conflicts, the origin of these conflicts, and the anticipation of overcoming them…I refer here especially to those instances where [Plato] employs mythology, for existence, in distinction from essence (from what man essentially is), cannot be derived in terms of necessity from his essential nature. Existence is that which stands against essence although it is dependent on essence” (1).

Existentialism is basically a problem of human existence, and the question it poses is: What is one to do with this existence, which one was given without any explanation of its purpose, but is now facing death? What is the meaning of it all? Is there even a meaning to begin with? Unlike Descartes’ explanation of the human mind (which is conscious and defined by God’s mind, thereby making the human essence dependent on God’s essence), existentialism separates existence from the essence. The meaning of human existence, according to existentialists, is not defined by the essence given to the being at its creation or birth; human meaning derives from what that person makes of it in his/her lifetime. Therefore, the slogan that existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre raises in “Existentialism Is a Humanism” is: “Existence precedes essence” (227).

In The Calvin and Hobbes Tenth Anniversary Book, Watterson explains that Charles Schulz’s Peanuts was the strip that determined his career as a cartoonist:

“…once I saw them, I knew I wanted to be a cartoonist. I instantly related to the flat, spare drawings, the honesty of the children’s insecurities, and to Snoopy’s bizarre and separate world. At the time, I didn’t appreciate how innovative all that was—I just knew it had a kind of humor and truth that other strips lacked. Now when I reread the old books, I’m amazed at what a melancholy comic strip it was
in the ‘60s. Surely no other strip has presented a world so relentlessly cruel and heartless” (17).

As mentioned earlier, Watterson claims that the importance of cartooning is “expressing something real and honest.” Watterson’s art entails the whole of life, not just slivers; he has learned from his artistic predecessors that presenting honesty requires one to includes its darkest aspects, because it is just as real and honest in the world as the lovely parts are.

To regard *Calvin and Hobbes* as simply charming, cute, and hilarious would be to regard Watterson’s art superficially and with a limited scope. Watterson continues: “I think the most important thing I learned from *Peanuts* is that a comic strip can have an emotional edge to it and that it can talk about the big issues of life in a sensitive and perceptive way” (17). Historically, it wouldn’t be accurate to say that Watterson opened his eyes to existentialism due to war. Unlike Schulz, Watterson wasn’t a war veteran. But opening ones eyes to the consciousness of human life, and what it means to be a human being is a timeless debate. As a cartoonist in the 80s and 90s, Watterson reveals how harsh life could be even for a six-year-old:
Part of the honesty in Watterson’s work is the accurate depiction of a six-year-old’s reality. Calvin is at an age where adults won’t necessarily take his qualms seriously; people presume a child’s life to be completely lacking in life’s pains, but Watterson reveals that life is equally painful for children as it can be for adults, because they are just as human. This is reminiscent of Barrett’s earlier explanation of modern art’s elements: the flattening of planes and values; by realizing the value of Schulz’s depiction of a child’s cruel world and utilizing the significance that gives modern art its definition, Watterson is able to deliver another form of subjective reality: Calvin’s bad day. In this particular strip, Hobbes’s remark that Calvin has done all he could do is gloomy with
irony: The truth of the matter, which Calvin finds so difficult to accept, is that there really isn’t anything that a person can do to control the fate of one’s day.

Conclusion

Through *Calvin and Hobbes*, Watterson explores life and its daily and mundane aspects as well as its extravagant and magical facets. He gives us a postmodern artist’s example of art and reflection of life. Influences from (but not limited to) the modern era in a literary, philosophical, and artistic sense are very present throughout the strip, however, Watterson has also grounded his work to present circumstances and interpreted the examples left behind by his predecessors with a postmodern flavor.

Eagleton claims that postmodernism “mimes the formal resolution of art and social life attempted by the avant-garde while remorselessly emptying it of its political content” (qtd. in “Avant-garde/Modernism/Postmodernism,” Geoffrey Kantaris, 1997). The critics of postmodernism over the years had a problem with considering postmodern art as art because it lacked the seriousness and depth that modernists were so used to applying. But the reason for these critics’ criticisms is that they approach postmodern works with a modern preconception of art; according to World Wide Arts Resources (WWAR), Postmodernism rejects “the Modernist preoccupation with purity of form and technique, and aimed to eradicate the divisions between art, popular culture, and the media. Postmodern artists employed influences from an array of past movements, applying them to modern forms. Postmodernists embraced diversity and rejected the distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ art. Ignoring genre boundaries, the movement encourages the mix of ideas, medias, and forms to promote parody, humor, and irony”
Calvin and Hobbes is Watterson’s testament to just how far art has come over the years. By bringing together an illustrative art form together with literature through cartoons, it makes the ultimate postmodern statement that there is no distinction between so-called “high art” from “low art”—all is art, whether or not it is profound in meaning or statement.

However, Watterson does warn artists against the “cheapening” art. His opposition to merchandising his characters is a critical testament to how it gives the artist control of his work. It is also a criticism of how severe American consumerism has gotten; by refusing to license his artwork, he has saved his work from becoming just another item among countless others. Watterson has made it clear to American readers and consumers that the cheapening of art is definitely a danger to art. Part of Watterson’s goal is to discourage art from getting trivialized into “decontextualized sayings or verses or images that function as decals and are eventually ignored,” as said by E.J. Park in “A Tale of Two Kitties” (70). The fact that his anti-commercial position throughout the years hasn’t prevented his characters from becoming any less popular is a large statement in itself. In fact, this prevention of merchandizing his characters has kept them more lively and real inside readers’ minds. On a personal level, it gives me a reason to return to the books to reread and experience the spirit of Calvin and Hobbes. I believe is the best way to experience any art: to view and appreciate the work itself and it alone.
Works Cited


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