

Onomatopoeia

Did you ever watch cartoons or read comic books when you were a kid? You can admit it now, because nobody is looking over your shoulder watching you read this, but didn't we all? If you were like me, occasional escapes from reality served as a refreshing change of pace from our somewhat structured lives. Watching all those animated characters do things we could only dream about served to stimulate our imagination. There we could see animals that acted and spoke like people, and people who acted like . . . well, we really couldn't be sure what characterized some of their actions, but they weren't typical of people we encountered in our bland and ordinary lives.



As you reminisce back to those days of cartoon watching, were you aware that your favorite characters only had four fingers on each hand? Whether it is a characterization of a human or an animal with human personality traits, all are depicted with three fingers and a thumb! Why not give them that fifth finger? It isn't that hard to draw, but universally, they didn't do it. While there were rare exceptions (like the occasional appearance of God in *the*



Simpsons), artists of that era found it easier not to include the fifth finger for reasons of simplicity. Remember, in those days of early animation, artists had to draw each individual scene along with every character in motion. Eliminating that fifth finger might have been a time saving measure (after all, thousands of fingers not drawn were thousands of pen strokes saved!) Throughout the years, we've learned to accept that fact. Maybe it was done so they couldn't give someone they didn't like that infamous middle finger gesture because they didn't have one! Remember, cartoons are for kids!

There was something else that fictional comic book characters often did that set them apart from the real world, and that was in the area of sound and how it was communicated to the reader. They did not make ordinary sounds like those we commonly hear, but noises that exaggerated in comics involving action figures because the words would pop up right there on the page. In their world, it wasn't enough to show surprise just by using facial expressions. That alone wouldn't do it. Something else was needed to complete the image.

Onomatopoeia

On·o·mat·o·poe·ia - *noun*. 1. *The formation or use of words such as buzz or growl that imitate the sounds associated with the objects or actions to*



which they refer. That's the definition in *Webster's Dictionary*. It's all around us, and there are times we, as humans, use it for effect, but nowhere is it more evident than in the comics. Whenever a superhero confronted a villain and an altercation was inevitable, the resulting sound of a fist against the villain's jaw was *Pow!* In a still picture, the reader might not get the full impact of what they just saw, but graphic artists used visuals to complete the picture. Images like these help give readers a more graphic feeling of what was happening. The term for this particular method of communication is onomatopoeia, and it helps the readers "visually hear" the sounds of those words.



Have you ever been engaged in what you thought was a normal conversation with someone and out of nowhere he or she made references like *swish*, *crash*, *clunk*, *whiff*, *whoosh*, *gasp*, or *zap* to give you a unique perspective while describing an action? If you're like most people, there were times you started your day by awakening to the *buzz* of your alarm clock, *gulping* down a cup of coffee, and *zoomed* off to the office because you were late for work? While some of these expressions have gained acceptance simply based on the number of times they have been used, they aren't appropriate descriptions grammatically speaking even though most are found in the dictionary. In their present form, they do serve a purpose, and that is to add a new dimension to the reader's level of comprehension; the using of a word that imitates a sound. It is as if you have been transported into another dimension—the surreal world of comics and animation.



In the world of advertising, onomatopoeia has made a strong impact with a number of successful product campaigns. “Plop, plop, fizz, fizz” with Speedy Alka-Seltzer and “Snap, Crackle, Pop” for Rice Krispies are two notable successes in which their trademark sounds became household words and helped launch and maintain successful sales. The Rice Krispies elf characters appropriately named Snap, Crackle, and

Pop were originally designed by illustrator Vernon Grant in the early 1930s and stayed in the forefront for more than fifty years. They represented the unique sound the cereal makes as milk is being poured over it. Marketing execs picked up on this sound and decided to make it the focus of their advertising campaigns. The campaign for Alka-Seltzer using Speedy as the lead was introduced in the 1960s and ran for almost two decades.

Parallel Universe

Another characteristic of the world of animation is that it assumes its own identity in a surreal world. Characters who reside in that parallel universe have their own rules. Animated and cartoon characters are



not governed by our physical laws. Some can fly while others have super-human strength and can use it for either good or evil. In fact, characters that first appeared as early as the 1930s haven't aged a day! In the 1988 movie entitled, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, we saw a wonderful example showing that parallel worlds can and do exist. Those Parallel Lives consisted of what we know in our world, and a second world of fiction and imagination—*Toontown*, where cartoon characters exist separately and apart from humans. As we have

discovered, there are hidden passageways that link these two worlds, and they are difficult to find. While it isn't easy, it has been done on many occasions.

In *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, Bob Hoskins appears as private detective Eddie Valiant. Eddie is a 1950's era gumshoe (cast in the mold of Mickey Spillane's tough guy character Mike Hammer), who investigates a Toontown murder involving the famous cartoon character, Roger Rabbit. Roger is accused of killing



Marvin Acme, the owner of Acme Corporation. Once Eddie crosses into Toontown he learns that everything in his investigation is

Judge Doom threatens Roger with "the Dip." according to their rules. He meets a number of familiar cartoon characters, some of which go out of their way to help him. There are also others that are pure villains that will do anything to thwart his efforts. In the world of Toontown, Judge Doom is leading the resistance. Although "toons" are virtually impervious to physical harm, Doom has assumed a position of power because he discovered that they can be killed by being submerged in a deadly mixture of Turpentine Acetone, and Benzene, or "the Dip." These ingredients are nothing more than paint thinners that are used to remove drawings from cartoon production cells in filming. He demonstrates it by

dropping an innocent cartoon shoe into the mixture. The shoe quickly dissolves in the dip leaving only a trail of blurred and disoriented ink. Both toons and humans got the message. Scary!

Before *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* hit the theatres, perhaps the most famous instance of a human entering the world of fiction was *Alice in Wonderland* written by Lewis Carroll in 1865. In her journey to Wonderland, Alice met characters like the White Rabbit (who carried a



pocket watch), the Hatter, a Dormouse, a Caterpillar, the Queen of Hearts (the ruler of Wonderland), and the ever-smiling Cheshire Cat. It was a world where fantasy superseded reality, and seven year old Alice was the link between both worlds. The Cheshire Cat had the ability to fade away from sight until it disappeared entirely, leaving only its wide grin suspended in the air. Regarding this character, Alice commented that she has seen a cat

without a grin, but never a grin without a cat. The trick is not just to go down that *Alice in Wonderland* rabbit hole, but to get back to familiar surroundings as well.

Cogito Ergo Sum

Philosopher and thinker Rene Descartes is responsible for this often quoted phrase. It is Latin for “I think, therefore I am.” He referenced *cogito ergo sum* in the *Principles of Philosophy* written in 1644. Its essence is as follows: “The very act of doubting one's own existence serves as proof of the reality of one's own existence.” Now that’s some very deep thinking. In short, things or beings that can think can be certain of their *own* existence. Didn’t we just witness examples of cartoon characters coming to life, by thinking, speaking and interacting earlier in this piece? According to the renowned philosopher Rene Descartes, *they really do exist!*

Cartoon characters can think, speak, and even act like us. While we have witnessed them doing all of these actions, we have to admit there are times they do things much differently than humans. Because of their unique personalities, many characters became very famous, some deservedly so, but others . . .

Walt Disney got his idea for Mickey Mouse while working in his garage. He was watching mice play one evening and got the inspiration for Mortimer Mouse. He didn’t change the character’s name until shortly before he

finished the first Mickey Mouse cartoon—the 1928 classic *Steamboat Willie*. That short animated movie was the beginning for Walt Disney and his most famous character. Looking at the success of Mickey Mouse, I started to wonder about just what it was that propelled him to the status of an industry icon. What is Mickey Mouse’s claim to fame? I’m not certain I know. Have you ever laughed at something Mickey Mouse did either in a comic strip or a cartoon? Everybody loves Mickey Mouse, but why? Mickey’s character is cute, and he is perhaps the most recognizable cartoon character in the world. He is a legend, but is he funny? My parents grew up during the same time period as Mickey, and when I was a child, I asked them if they thought he was funny. They both looked at me like I was crazy, but when I pushed for an answer, neither could come up with anything. So, can *you* name one funny thing Mickey Mouse has ever done that made you laugh?



Not all animated or cartoon characters needed to be funny. We have seen scores of action figures like Superman, Batman, and Captain America go through their adventure series and barely crack a smile. Rarely were there instances of humor in *The Adventures of Superman*. When it came to catching the bad guys and pursuing “Truth, Justice, and the American Way,” the

guy with the big S on his chest was all business. If we wanted humor, we had to look elsewhere.



Perhaps some of the best examples of onomatopoeia in the cartoon world can be found in *The Adventures of the Road Runner* series featuring Wile E. Coyote. In one of the coyote's numerous ill-fated attempts to outsmart and capture the Roadrunner,

we see him strapping on a pair of rocket-powered roller skates from the Acme Company. In other episodes, he drops anvils, uses sticks of dynamite, slingshots, and even a painted tunnel to try to trap the elusive coyote, all for naught. There probably isn't a person among us who hasn't reiterated the "Beep, beep" of the Roadrunner each time he took off from a standing start. The catastrophes that resulted from these futile attempts are graphically illustrated along with the sounds of those setbacks. These frustrations occurred because all of these events happened in the world of animation and cartoons. In our world, Wile E. Coyote would easily catch the Roadrunner because roadrunners can only run up to twenty miles per hour, while a coyote's speedometer tops out at forty-three. Sounds like lunchtime to me! Think about all the money Mr. Coyote could have saved on all of those ill-fated Acme products.

Watch what you're saying!

How many times have you heard someone tell you that? Unless we are speaking sign language or carrying around posters with our words printed on them, it is a very difficult thing to do. They must have their sensory perceptions confused. We can hear what we are saying, but how can we watch our words?

Perhaps the closest we come to watching what we say happens when the outside temperature is cold enough for us to see our breath when we speak or exhale. If we kept an artist with us who was able to draw a caricature of us complete with the dialog balloon hovering over our head each time we spoke, we might be able to accomplish this trick. Even then, we would have to stop what we were doing to look up and read the words. Do comic strip characters look above their heads at those balloons that contain their actual words written in them to make sure they are correct? If they don't, maybe they should. That way, we wouldn't be the only ones that can see them.

I can see mine!



You see, it wasn't just Alice and Roger Rabbit that showed us that these two worlds coexist. As you now know, discovering this connection wasn't easy, but it has

been done. So do you still doubt that these “parallel worlds exist? We take other things on faith, so why not this? It’s not like air, which is something you can’t see but you know is all around you. These characters (in both realms) are all around you too, and if you look carefully, you can see them! It’s really fun when you find yourself in the company of cartoon characters, animated or otherwise. Just look around. There might be several where you work, or seated just a table away at your favorite restaurant. You’ll know them when you see them. Once you grasp this concept, you will be among that group of unique individuals who knows how to escape reality for a while and refuses to take everything in life seriously. Yes, you too can be someone who has a sense of humor and knows how to use it.



Cartoon characters that look like real people.

Keep smiling!

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