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Natsume Fusanosuke

Jon Holt

Portland State University, joholt@pdx.edu

Teppei Fukuda

Portland State University, ftp.1018@gmail.com

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CHARLIE BROWN AND ME

Natsume Fusanosuke | October 4, 2021

Charles Schulz's *Peanuts* turned 71 years old on October 2, and we celebrate the anniversary of this world-famous comic strip with a love letter from Japan. Natsume Fusanosuke originally wrote this essay^[1] about his connection to *Peanuts* in 1999 for a supplement issue of *Bungei Shunjū* magazine: a special on one of the gods of comics, Tezuka Osamu, with whom Charles Schulz stands in great company. Natsume is a voracious reader and a global observer of both manga and world comics. Here, he describes the appeal of *Peanuts* for Japanese readers and how it compares to a similarly beloved Japanese comic and cartoon character, the blue robot cat Doraemon. *Peanuts* was imported to Japan in 1969 (translated by the poet Tanikawa Shuntarō), and still enjoys great popularity (Fantagraphics' *The Complete Peanuts* was published in Japan in 2019 by Kawade Shobō). Natsume considers some of the cultural factors that explain why the strip, even though it is very American, still appeals to generations of Japanese after all these years. He also attempts to explain why the character Doraemon has a similar appeal to many Asian peoples, but had yet to (and has yet to) find an audience in America. We take this moment to wish Charlie Brown, Snoopy, and the *Peanuts* gang a happy birthday!

- Jon Holt & Teppei Fukuda, translators

* * *

When Charles M. Schulz first serialized *Peanuts* in October 1950, it had probably just been about two months since I had been born into this world.

Gosh, me and Charlie Brown are of the same age. Well, I guess he has to be a bit older than me, after all, he had to be a certain number of years old before his comic strip got started, right?

Look, this is not my point, but, gosh, let me just say that Charlie is quite a good man.

I mean, it is true that he has no talent; he is clumsy; he can be a bit dumb; and, other people often get the best of him. He is so bad that he often goes to Lucy for “counselling” and says things like, “What bothers me is that I don’t know if I am doing something wrong.”



Even so, this is a guy who always accepts his own foolishness, yet, somehow, he keeps on living. Charlie Brown is so much different on that point from *Doraemon*'s Nobita-kun, even though both are clumsy dummies.

Nonetheless, I wonder why on earth Charlie Brown ends up always going to Lucy to open his heart and get her help on resolving his dilemmas. It doesn't make sense to me.

Am I right or am I right? Ever since he appeared in the early 1950s, he made us all see how cute he was with that baby-like face, which in the very beginning was close to two times the length of the size of his whole body (later Schulz made Charlie's head about three times the height of his whole body), but, well, anyway Charlie, what is wrong with you? Why do you always give the football to Lucy? She only will snatch it away from you right before your kick and make you fall on your tuchus!

Actually, I get it. That's what makes Charlie such a good fellow after all.

Of all people, Charlie knows all too well how much Lucy disdains him. That's why he tries to not be deceived by her so he ignores her football invitations at first. And then he gets said to him by Lucy, "Charlie Brown, when did you become so distrustful of human beings?" Charlie will then go charging in for his kick, and, of course Lucy pulls it away from him, he falls, and, in the end, Lucy tells him, "Let this be a good experience for you."

But, even Lucy has her weaknesses. She loves Schroder, but when he begins to play his beloved Beethoven, she, who knows nothing at all of his "art" will say something like, "Beethoven can't compare to a free trading card you get in a pack of bubble gum." C'mon, everyone has a soft spot. We all make fools of ourselves at times.

We all have our bad points; we all get tricked; we all say stuff that hurts other people; we all tell people our problems; we all take things on the chin and keep on living.

According to one book I read, the English that the kids speak makes them seem quite like precocious children. When you read the Japanese translated version, Schultz's philosophical parts make you feel that the gang is still a bit elevated from their childhood status, but it might be just that these kids can handle things pretty well.

I bet we can say that we all grew up living out the scenes drawn in *Peanuts*, worrying about the same stuff, and finding joy in the same stuff Charlie Brown and the gang did.

The pure expressive power *Peanuts* has makes me feel this way—after all, that must be one of many reasons why the comic was able to sell worldwide as much as 300,000,000 copies (just the paperback editions alone). Fair enough, I cannot deny that one other reason why it was such a bestseller outside of the comic's expressive power was that the stuffed animal Snoopy became a such a successful toy product.

That's true. I have to admit Snoopy always gets it good—better stuff than anyone else gets.

In the beginning, Snoopy was just the dog who ran in the background behind all of the kid characters, but around the turn of the 1960s, Schulz made him stand on his two legs and began to feature him as a star of the series, so much so that Snoopy stole the scenes from the other cast members.

I say that, but it is so clear that Snoopy owes everything to the rest of the *Peanuts* cast. If you wonder why, just think how the other characters, just like us in real life, have to live bearing the "limitations" set on them—which are also set on us!—and because they bear these limitations, the gang always ends up just becoming the "story material" (*neta*) in their own comic.

Schroder always gets his "art" disturbed by Lucy's chatter; the *Peanuts* philosopher, Linus, who often quotes Kipling, never can depart from his beloved blanket. Always lovelorn, always having his baseball game get disrupted by debates or losing the game because of one careless pitch, that Charlie Brown! Charlie Brown, ready to give up his future, ready to forsake his life's chances and quit school and dedicate himself only for the happiness of his pet dog Snoopy. That Charlie Brown!

Life is nothing but "limitations" put on us by both ourselves and by the outside world. That is why we all feel such a close connection to those *Peanuts* characters. I say that, but of course, Snoopy occupies the same world but he gets to live the good life (a dog's life), doing whatever he wants however he wants. Sometimes, he, too, might suffer some setbacks from this meaningless world, but, in the end, he always sees his food bowl and joyfully shouts, "Here IS the meaning in life!"

Like the flying and morphing mouth of the Cheshire Cat from *Alice in Wonderland*, Snoopy can become all the things he wants to be in life, be it Surgeon Snoopy, Author Snoopy, or, of course, the Flying Ace. Well, he can as long as he has his pal Woodstock and his doghouse.

Ok, so maybe we can see a similar construction here to *Doraemon* in Japan: if Charlie = Nobita-kun, then Snoopy = Doraemon.

After all, in both comics, you have a human protagonist who is burdened with all the "limitations"—the facts of life; and then there is a non-human character, who, conversely, can do whatever he wants, unlike Nobita-kun and Charlie Brown.



Cover art to a digital collection of *Doraemon* comics.

The more I think about it, I guess the characters in *Doraemon* really are spoiled (*amattareta*). Whenever Nobita-kun gets into trouble he can always ask Doraemon, who is always there to save him with unconditional love.[2] This wish for limitless realization of an imaginative, infant-like world is the root cause of procrastination for elementary schoolchildren in the world of *Doraemon*. It is something close to Freud's pleasure principle or the fantasy world of the young. It is the source of a very Eastern deferment (*moratoriamu*) of duty and responsibility.

On the other hand, in *Peanuts*, Charlie Brown never relies on Snoopy for anything. I don't think I've ever seen Snoopy try to help Charlie Brown, either. Somehow, Snoopy could always say to Charlie Brown that he actually has always been quite happy, even before Charlie decided to dedicate his life to the happiness of his dog.

Snoopy lives Snoopy's life; just like Charlie

lives Charlie's life.

There is no need to mention their personal responsibility. "Identity"—that's a word meant for all the *Peanuts* characters.

It is funny that Doraemon at this point [in 1999] has become such a classic manga character for people all over Asia, but the series never really has caught on in Western countries. I wonder why that is. In many of these countries, they do not even broadcast the anime version of *Doraemon*. There are a probably many reasons why it never became a television staple there like it did in Asia. For example, and I am guessing here, but perhaps the people who own the rights to the property gave up on doing it because they felt Western children had a different sense of values from that of their Asian peers, like I mentioned earlier. We do not really know if American and European children ever would like *Doraemon*, but that is a whole other ball of wax. The real problem must have more to do with the values of adults, not those of their children.

In 1990 at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington D.C., there was a special exhibit entitled, "This is Your Childhood, Charlie Brown: Children in American Culture, 1945-1968". Part of the guidebook copy reads:

The humor of *Peanuts* comes from the story's kid characters, who, taking on problems in adult society, speak and behave like educated and middle-class adults.

(quoted in Hirobuchi Masahiko, *A Journalist's View of America through Snoopy* [*Sunūpi tachi no Amerika*], Shinchōsha, 1993)

Now it is clear to me: *Peanuts* expresses the view of middle-class Americans!

If that is true, then that's also why we Japanese have ended up thinking that America is the country of Superman, who is so strong and macho. Maybe that's why we think that Americans themselves think of themselves like they are the Superman character. But the truth is that everywhere there are Charlie Browns, Linuses, and Lucys.

However, we [Japanese] love our *Doraemon*. We still revere its creator, Fujiko F. Fujio, for drawing all of those fantastic robot-cat adventures, even though he was a grownup when he was drawing them. Japanese have a similar affection for the old monk poet Ryōkan. We still have a longing

for the simpler aspects of youthfulness and humanity. Charlie Brown and the *Peanuts* gang have something that makes them somehow different from us Japanese—it's their confidence and the pressures of being an adult.

Those adult traits of confidence and conviction have for a long time been gone in Japanese culture. From a Japanese point of view, Charlie Brown faces pressures that seem to come from some hard underlying framework; or, they are something like big like a stone wall looming over him—something that must come from the authoritative world of being an “adult” or an “individual.” Now, whether or not one feels that difference is a good thing or a bad thing—either for Japanese or for Americans—is problem I'll let others think about.

There's one episode from the 1970s where Charlie Brown wears a paper bag on his head to cover his eyes, but somehow, once he puts it on, he suddenly he becomes the stand-up guy for the camping troop, their hero really. Yet, once he takes off the bag, he loses all the respect everybody had for him. Why is that?

I really like this episode because it seems that it has a truth of life and the truth of the world, which you can feel no matter who you are. What makes this comic strip so interesting is how often you have those “I kind of get it” (*ki ga suru*) feelings from *Peanuts* as you read it, but Schulz does not take it any further than that. Schulz must have felt this way, so he included subtle little moments (*zetsumyō no ma-ai*) like these—those places where we all can “kind of get it.”

Of course, I realize that this is the most effective and fashionable way people now have to broaden their own notions of “truth” (*shinjutsu*).

So, with that in mind, that is why I think it's time for me to put down my pen. I'll stop right here. I won't go overboard and talk about the problems of Americans or about the differences between the East and the West. The rest is your homework, everyone!

I can just hear Charlie Brown would do next.

“SIGH”

* * *

[1] “Boku wa Charāi to dōseidai” was originally published in the May 25, 1999 issue of *Bungei Shunjū Special Issue: Tezuka Osamu* (Kawaide Shobō Shinsha). This essay reappears in Natsume's *Manga no fuka-yomi, otona-yomi* (East Press, 2004 [republished by Kōbunsha, 2006]), pp. 53-59.

[2] I should point out at this point that Fujiko F. Fujio as the creator actually was well aware of the problem of the characters never growing up. After the serialization of *Doraemon* suddenly came to a halt, at least in the later science-fiction manga books and the movies he made for big screen, he did try to deal with this problem—but that is something outside of the scope of the present essay, so let's put that question aside for now.

WRITTEN BY

Natsume Fusanosuke

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