

Creating Meaning Through Written and Visual Language in George Herriman's *Krazy Kat*

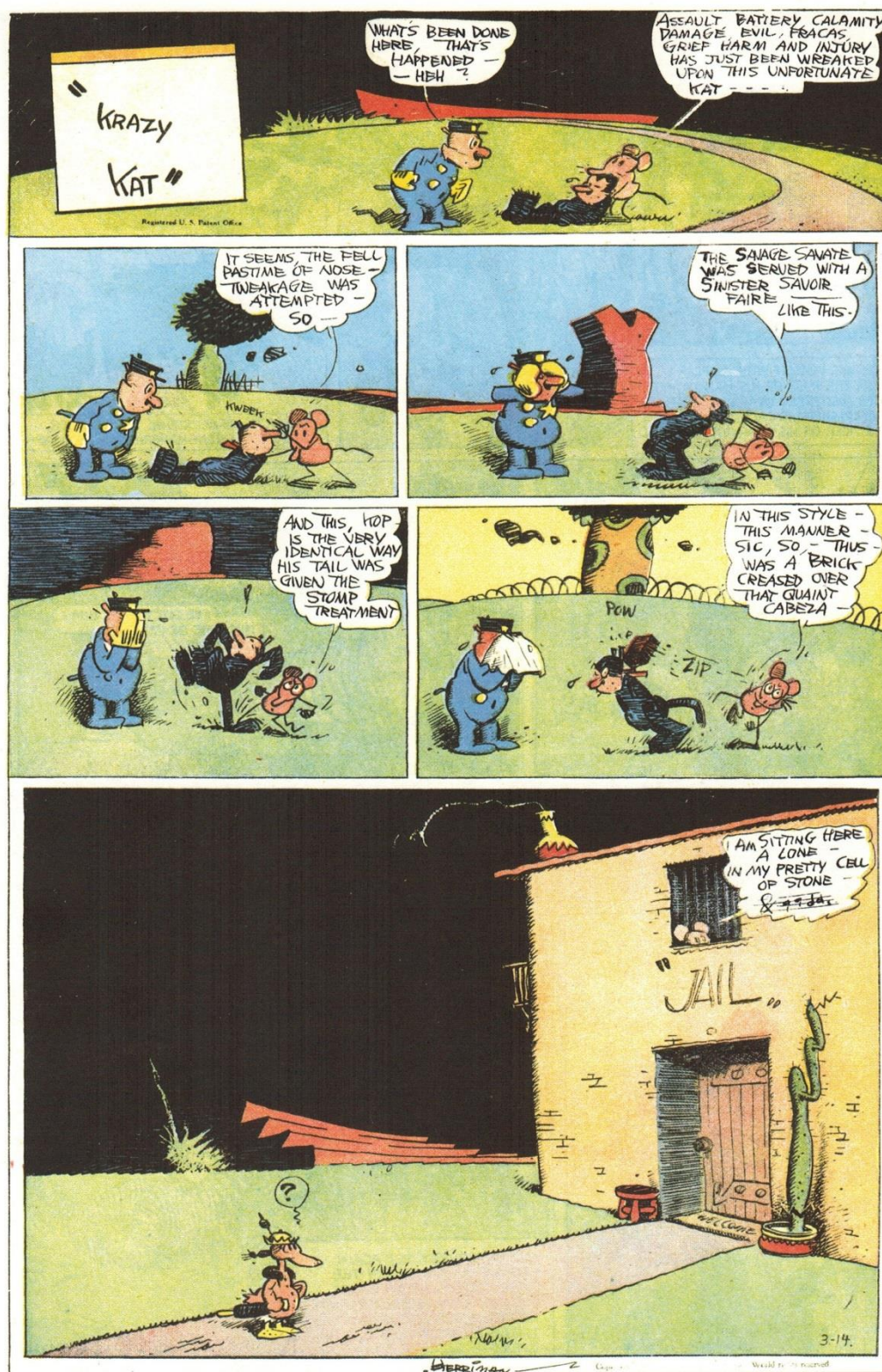
George Herriman's *Krazy Kat*, a newspaper comic strip that ran in American newspapers from 1913 to 1944, featured three central characters which the plot revolves around. The first character, Krazy, a cat of indeterminate gender (Krazy's gender varies from strip to strip and for purposes of clarity in this essay Krazy will be referred to as "she", however Krazy is just as much a "he" as a "she") is a happy, innocent cat that is in love with Ignatz mouse, who attacks Krazy repeatedly by throwing a brick at her head. The third character, Offissa Pupp, is a police officer dog who is in love with Krazy, and is constantly trying to protect her. These three characters form a peculiar love triangle that constitutes the simple plot of the comic strip. The characters seem to be oblivious to one another's goals; Ignatz will do anything to get a chance to throw a brick at Krazy, who interprets the brick throwing as a symbol of affection, and Offissa is constantly trying to protect Krazy from getting hit in the head by the brick, even though the brick to the head is exactly what Krazy loves. With such a simple plot, why then, was *Krazy Kat* a comic that was "reputed to have been read by Gertrude Stein, Earnest Hemingway, Pablo Picasso, Edmund Wilson, e e cummings, Louis Zukovsky, and T.S. Eliot" (Willmott 845)? The genius of *Krazy Kat* lies in Herriman's ability to manipulate language and the comic form to create meaning beyond the simple plot of the comic. *Krazy Kat* is filled with metaphor and a musicality of language that brings it into the realm of poetry, where a reader "could discover the possibility of a purely allusive world, a pleasure of a "musical" nature, an interplay of feelings that were not banal." (Eco)

When we look at the *Krazy Kat* comic, it is important to recognize the parameters of the form that Herriman was working in. The comic strips that we will look at in this essay are full-

page color newspaper comic strips, printed on Sundays between 1937 and 1938. These pages were rectangular in shape and much larger than the Sunday strips that we are accustomed to in today's newspapers, which gave Herriman the freedom to use the space in a variety of ways, including manipulating number, size and shape of panels. Typically, though, there were four to five horizontal rows of panels, with one to four panels within those rows. The animal inhabitants of Coconino County speak English (mostly), or at least a "Herrimanized" version of English and almost every comic is a variation on the love triangle plot line that Herriman created.

(See next page)

On March 14th 1937, Herriman published the following Sunday strip:



March 14th, 1937.

This comic is a variation on the basic plot Herriman has for *Krazy Kat*. Offissa Pupp has encountered Ignatz holding what looks like an unconscious Krazy and inquires what happened to her. Ignatz gives a lengthy explanation of how Krazy has been attacked by demonstrating the transgressions against her, by actually assaulting Krazy in the process. The infamous brick is indeed thrown at Krazy, and the strip ends by Ignatz being put in jail. The comic's plot is quite simple, but a closer look at the strip will reveal how Herriman "exploits the system's dual graphic-phonetic form for both its screwball inconsistencies and for the impressionistic auditory effects of those surface sounds" (Miodrag 37), using both words and visual elements to play with meaning.

The content of the word balloons in this comic is essential to analyze when looking at what more Herriman could be saying in *Krazy Kat*. Word balloons are "synesthetic icons" that contribute sound to an otherwise visual medium (McCloud 134), and what these characters say inside of the word balloons not only progresses the plot of the strip, but the way they say them can add layers of meaning to Herriman's work. In the first panel of this strip, Ignatz responds to Offissa Pupp's inquiries with a list of related words in alphabetical order. Using a list in alphabetical order gives the reader the idea that there is an entire alphabet of words that can be used to describe what happened to Krazy. This could be Herriman showing how flexible the English language is, based on the variety of words Ignatz is able to come up with.

In panel three, Ignatz kicks Krazy while explaining what happened, using alliteration when he says, "The savage savate was served with a sinister savoir faire --- like this", causing Offissa Pupp to raise his hands to his face in distress. By using alliteration, what he's saying has more emphasis, asking the reader to pay close attention. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word "savate" is a French word for a form of boxing that uses the feet as well as

the fists. The “savate” in this strip was performed with “savoir faire” which is another French term, this one meaning “knowledge of the correct course of action in a particular situation, know-how” (OED). If a reader catches what “savate” means they probably wouldn’t believe that using a form of French kick boxing on Krazy was the correct thing to do, but that’s what Ignatz says. What does he mean by this? What has been happened to Krazy is indeed sinister, but it was an act by someone who knows the correct thing to do in the situation. This is a subtle way to say that the one (Ignatz) who has inflicted these transgressions on Krazy is possibly doing something good for her. Herriman can deliver two messages at once, the primary one that poor Krazy is getting beat up, and the more subtle meaning that brings the first interpretation into question, that perhaps Ignatz is doing good by kicking Krazy. Of course, Krazy isn’t awake to give her opinion on the matter.

Herriman uses alliteration again in the fifth panel where Ignatz is throwing a brick at Krazy. This time, it is the “k” sound, starting with the word “sic”. Sic is a Latin word similar to “so” or “thus” (which Ignatz also uses in his response) that is used to “call attention to something anomalous or erroneous in the original or to guard against the supposition of misquotation” (OED). For some reason, Ignatz needs to be triple sure that what he says next is correct by using three different words that have similar meanings to preface the next thing he says, which is that “a brick crease over that quaint cabeza” (“cabeza” means “head” in Spanish), This statement uses the “k” sound four times, even though only one of the words actually has a “k” in it. Ignatz’s use of alliterative phrases and lists of words to describe what happened to Krazy again shows how many ways the situation could be described, but at the end of the strip, he ends up in jail, which is what would have happened no matter what.

In the last panel, where you see Ignatz sitting in jail, his word balloon contains a rhyming couplet (“I am sitting here a lone – In my pretty cell of stone”) and music notes. The notes enforce the fact that the rhyming has a musical quality, as if Ignatz is singing what he says. The way that “a lone” looks like “alone” makes sense for this song, but if you listen to “a lone” it also sounds like “a loan”, as in something that has been lent to another. If you listen to, not look at what Ignatz says, it is as if he is saying that he is being lent to the jail, which could indicate that he has value. This could be related to what he says earlier about “savoir faire”, and perhaps Ignatz is once again saying he’s worth something because he knows what Krazy needs.

This is not the only strip that plays with language to add meaning to the *Krazy Kat* strips.

(See next page)

On April 18th, 1937 Herriman published the following strip:



April 18th, 1937.

This Sunday strip features a lot more of Krazy's speech as he talks to an "equatorial bear". As Robert Harvey describes in, "Krazy's literal interpretation of language there is an innocence at one with his romantic illusion" (177), which is illustrated as he tries to understand why the little bear is not a polar bear despite looking just like one. Krazy's speech is often spelled phonetically, which the reader in turn is supposed to "hear". For instance, in the very first panel, Krazy says "pertzin" for the word person. "Pertzin" is not a word, but it sounds like a word, so it communicates the message, demonstrating "Herriman's manipulation of unmeaning" and showing "an innate sense of rhetorical principal" (Shannon) where the linguistic concept of sign + signifier = signified is turned on its head by using a nonsense word to create meaning. Additionally, using the word "pertzin" which sounds like "person" to address what looks like a bear is a way in which Herriman is using the visual elements of the comic and the audio elements of language to test the limit of language.

Herriman uses homophones within the English language to play with meaning. Krazy also says "bare" instead of "bear", showing how she "is often befuddled by language. This confusion manifests itself in the transposing of approximate syllables to create a kind of colloquial pidgin dialect ... The cat is frequently stumped by language's slipperiness, wrong-footed by illogicalities such as homophones and language's continual refusal to follow its own rules" (Miodrag 20). Krazy's confusion with the words "bear" and "bare", as well her overall misunderstanding in this strip about the identity of the bear in front of her, is not just a cute joke, but an artistic use of language too.

In the fifth panel of this strip, Krazy says to the little bear, "so oppizzit - so fur, fur apott – how did they evva mit?" Again, Krazy is speaking phonetically, which is cute, but there could

be something else Herriman is trying to say with “fur” besides “far”. Yes, the little bear’s parents from opposite poles are physically far apart from one another, but the way Krazy says “fur” could also mean that the fur on the bears is also far apart. For a human, our color is determined by our skin, whereas for a bear, their fur would determine their color. Could Herriman be inferring that these bears are far apart in their colors as well as the literal distance? In the second to last scene, Krazy says “Heppy mittin’ on the equator – is all I gotta say.” The equator could be a metaphor for “meeting in the middle” since it is an invisible line dividing the earth in half. Not only are these bears meeting in the middle of the earth literally, but perhaps metaphorically, they are meeting in the middle no matter what color their fur is, and Krazy is happy with that.

These strips don’t just use the English language within their word balloons to play with meaning in *Krazy Kat*, Herriman also has the visual aspects of comics at his disposal as well. Herriman’s art style is important to this strip. These characters are not exact drawings of animals you would see in nature at all. If you look at Scott McCloud’s pyramid of the comic universe, a tool McCloud uses to explain how a reader responds to realistic or iconic drawings, we can see that Offissa Pupp from *Krazy Kat* is number 58 on the pyramid, closer to the iconic side, or the realm of meaning. (52) According to McCloud, the less realistic a drawing is, the more the audience is able to identify with the characters or icons presented. This process is called “viewer-identification” and in the case of *Krazy Kat* the art allows a reader to identify with the characters because they are drawings of animals that are so distanced from reality that the reader can insert themselves into the story and participate in the world of *Krazy Kat* much more easily than if the drawings accurately represented actual cats, dogs, mice and little bears. Not only are these animals merely icons or representational images of the original animal, but they they don’t act like the real animals they represent either. Glen Willmott describes Krazy aptly when he says

that, “The Kat, like other funny animals in comics and animated cartoons, is a stylistic synthesis of the human and the animal in a creature that is both and neither” (845). Krazy and the other animal characters possess both human and animal-like features, but the definitions of what those features may be are not based on what we know and assume about cats or humans in the real world. For instance, in *Krazy Kat*, the cat is in love with the mouse, the mouse attacks the cat, and the dog loves and protects the cat. If you picked this comic up for the first time, it would be logical to assume that the dog might chase the cat and the cat would chase the mouse, but that does not happen.

Another visual element of comics that Herriman uses to play with meaning is the inconsistent backgrounds in the panels, where a reader witnesses a shifting landscape in both of the strips we looked at. When the sky in the backgrounds change from black to blue or yellow and back again, it messes with the reader’s concept of what time it is in the comic. Typically black would represent night, while blue or yellow would signify daytime. The location of the scene changes as well. The objects in the background are different in each panel, shifting from rock formations, assorted vegetation, polka-dotted trees, etc., as if the background is moving behind the characters, or the characters have moved to another place. Conventionally, the background of a comic panel provides information to the reader about the setting of a story to provide context for the story, but in this case, it’s as if Herriman is taking away context, rather than adding it. Another way of putting it would be that “Krazy’s meaning is the destruction of the form of which it is a product. The drawings are as unreliable as Herriman’s mish-mash, randomly-punctuated dialect” (Shannon). Observing how the landscape changes from panel to panel draws your attention to the fact that even though you’re participating in viewer-identification, and you’re within the “reality” of *Krazy Kat*, this place you are in is more of an

illusion or dream than anything else. In Robert Harvey's book, *The Art of the Funnies*, he explains that *Krazy Kat*'s backgrounds are inspired by Monument Valley, a desert in southeast Utah, and that "the perpetual metamorphosis of Herriman's settings can, in part, be attributed to the changing light playing over the huge rock formations. These sculptures, though unchanged for millennia, appear to alter in color and shape with each blink of the eye as they pick up every gradation of the rays of the sun, passing across the heavens from dawn to dusk" (Harvey 177-8). These landscapes could be a metaphor for the flexibility of meaning within the verbal and visual language in *Krazy Kat*, the unmoving rocks representing reality, and the changing colors and shapes representing the lenses through which we see and hear reality, which are constantly changing.

Ignatz's reality in the first comic we looked at is that of him being socially just in his motivations, while Offissa Pupp saw what Ignatz did as a crime. The shifting landscape is as slippery as the multiple messages you can interpret from the language of the comic. This too, is applicable to the second comic that we looked at, where Krazy has a hard time understanding that the "polo bare" is actually an "equatorial bear". The shifting landscape in the comic could represent the change in Krazy's truth as she is educated on why the little bear is actually an equatorial bear despite "the mork of the polo rjijins is all ova your fomm, shap an' figga".

As Bill Watterson puts it, "*Krazy Kat*'s unique "texture" comes in large part through the conglomeration of peculiar spellings and punctuations, dialects, interminglings of Spanish, phonetic renderings, and alliterations. *Krazy Kat*'s Coconino County not only had a look; it had a sound as well. Slightly foreign, but uncontrived, it was an extraordinary and full world." (Watterson) Despite the simplicity of the repetitive plot, the love triangle between Krazy the cat, Offissa Pupp the dog, and Ignatz the mouse, Herriman was an artist who managed to take the

medium of comics to the next level, playing with sound and image to create meaning beyond the “text”. The metaphors a reader can find in these strips are endless. The poetry of *Krazy Kat*’s world was a place for Herriman to explore the complexities of language, visual communication, and meaning making in a modernist culture where historically the world was also experiencing rapid transformation and discovering new meaning for itself.

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