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National Association of Comics Art Educators

STUDY GUIDE:

THE COMPLETE PEANUTS by Charles M. Schulz

Volume One: 1950-1952

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Introduction

America was in the throes of post-war transition in 1950. Soldiers had returned home, started families and abandoned the cities for the sprawling green lawns of newly constructed suburbia. They had sacrificed during the Great Depression and subsequent war effort and this was their reward. Television was beginning to replace the picture-less radio not to mention live theater, supper clubs and dance halls, as Americans stayed home and raised families. Despite all this “progress” an empty feeling still resided in the pit of the American soul. Psychology, that new science that had recently gone mainstream, tried to explain why. Then, Charles M. Schulz’s little filler comic strip, Peanuts, appeared in the funny pages.

Schulz was born in 1922, the solitary child of a barber and his wife, in St. Paul, Minnesota. Sparky, his lifelong nickname, was given to him when he was an infant, by an uncle, after the comic strip character Barney Google’s racehorse Spark Plug. Schulz had an early love and talent for drawing. He enjoyed famous comic strips like Roy Crane’s *Wash Tubbs/Captain Easy* (1924-1943), the prototype of the adventure strip; E. C. Segar’s *Thimble Theater* (1919-1938), and its diverse cast of colorful characters going in and out rollicking adventures; and Percy Crosby’s *Skippy* (1925-1945) with its wise-for-his-age perceptive child protagonist.

Schulz was a bright student and skipped several grades, making him the youngest and smallest in his class. When in high school, the introverted youth felt depressed, alienated and lonely. "It took me a long time to become a human being," he once said of his high school years. "I was regarded by many as kind of sissified, which I resented because I was not a sissy. I was not a tough guy, but I was good at sports. I never regarded myself as being much and I never regarded myself as being good looking and I never had a date in high school, because I thought, who'd want to date me? So I didn't bother. And that's the way I grew up." When Schulz was a senior his mother showed him an ad in the newspaper that asked: "Do you like to draw? Send for a free talent test." He signed up for and completed the home study/mail order course. He drew gag cartoons intended for magazines, but was unable to make a sale.

Schulz was drafted in 1943 and shipped out days after his mother died of cancer. "The three years I spent in the army taught me all I need to know about loneliness," he once remarked. He returned to St. Paul at the end of the war, lived with his father and took up the cartooning trade in earnest. He practiced drawing and studied comics including the great George Herriman and his strip *Krazy Kat* (1910-1944) which he had never seen as a child. He became a grader with the mail order Famous Cartoonist School in Minnesota, from which he had graduated years earlier. He began to make the rounds in Chicago with his panel cartoons with little success. He got lucky in 1948 when he sold his panel cartoon feature *Li'l Folks* to the ladies section of a local St. Paul newspaper. Two years later he asked for a raise, was refused and promptly quit. During those two years, he had managed to sell 17 gag cartoons to the *Saturday Evening Post*. Determined, he boarded a train to New York and successfully sold his strip about children to a syndicate.

Peanuts was born. It's unfortunate that it was a title that Schulz despised. Peanuts was the title chosen by the syndicate and he felt stuck with it through his entire career. He thought the word “peanuts” was insignificant and had no dignity. The syndicate bought the strip as a “filler” strip, which meant it might not run steadily in any given paper. It was there to fill empty spaces

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between editorial content, other comic strips or advertising. *Peanuts'* four equal size panels meant the strip could run horizontally, stacked vertically, or as a square: two above, two below. Schulz's simple uncluttered line art meant the strip could be reduced to the size of a postage stamp and still be readable. It premiered Monday October 2, 1950. The Sunday strip would not begin until January 6, 1952.

Other long lived, famous and influential comics premiered close to the same time as *Peanuts*. Mort Walker began *Beetle Bailey* (1950-present) in September, a month before Schulz. It also featured simple modern uncluttered line work. *Hi and Lois* (1954-present) was a spin off by Walker & Dik Browne which was a domestic strip of a married couple and their three children in suburbia. Hank Ketcham's *Dennis the Menace* (1951-2001) premiered in March of the following year. Schulz, Walker, and Ketcham with their uncluttered modern line work were to become the new standard bearers of newspaper comics. As much due to the fact their the art could be reduced smaller and smaller to accommodate the shrinking comic's page as to their graphic excellence.

As *The Comics Journal* Editor-in-Chief, Gary Groth, wrote: "Although *Peanuts* has changed or evolved, it remains, as it began an anomaly in the comics page--a comic strip about the interior crises of the cartoonist himself." Charles M. Schulz created a modern American classic that is intensely personal yet so universal it is celebrated around the world. *Peanuts* will be read, enjoyed and studied for years to come.

Study Questions

- 1) In what ways do the *Peanuts* characters act like kids? In what ways do they not?
- 2) The early *Peanuts* strips have more backgrounds and props. Characters are shown in more varied poses as well. As time went on the strip became more spare. What other artists work became more spare as they moved through their career?
- 3) In what ways do the formal elements of the *Peanuts* strip reflect the trends of newspaper publishing and cartooning of the early fifties?
- 4) Snoopy, when first introduced, behaves like a real dog. What significant changes does Snoopy go through over the first two years?
- 5) Schulz introduces four new characters to join the original five in Volume One. How are they introduced, what character traits do they exhibit to make them individuals. How have they evolved and changed by the end of the book?
- 6) *Peanuts* was one among several of a new kind of sophisticated humor comic strip appearing post World War II. In what way are the early strips fresh and current? How is it dated and old fashioned?
- 7) Parents are rarely talked about or heard from and never seen. Why do you think Schulz decided not to show them? How does it change the reading of the strip?
- 8) How does the humor in *Peanuts* arise out of the personalities of the characters rather than a standard generic gag-a-day format?
- 9) Schulz introduced sarcasm, depression, and alienation to the comics' page. Find several examples of each. How do they compare to comics of earlier eras and today?

10) Cartoonist Al Capp (*Lil Abner*) once said: "The *Peanuts* characters are good, mean, little bastards. [They're] eager to hurt each other. That's why they are so delicious. They wound each other with the greatest enthusiasm." The Italian Cultural Critic, Umberto Eco wrote: "[The *Peanuts* Characters] affect us because in a certain sense they are monsters. They are the monstrous infantile reductions of all the neuroses of a modern citizen of the industrial civilization." Do you agree or disagree? Discuss.

11) When Schulz begins drawing a Sunday *Peanuts*, he adds more detail in the background and the characters themselves become less graphic. Is this a good development? Does it make the strip more interesting or is it distracting?

12) How is the set-up of a gag in a four-panel strip different from a Sunday strip?

Studio Exercises

1) Schulz's characters evolved over the two years covered in volume one. Design a simple character that can be drawn in less than five minutes with a pen, marker or brush. Draw the character once a day for a month in a small notebook. Use a clip to bind the drawn on pages. Remove the clip at the end of the month. How does the character differ from the first version you drew? Does the drawing take less time? Does the drawing show more confidence?

2) Make a copy of that final character drawing. White out the face. Make six copies of the altered drawing. Draw in new faces to express: anger, distrust, envy, depression, shock, boredom, pride. Pin up drawings and see if other students can correctly identify the emotion. If the emotion is unclear, how can the facial expression be corrected?

3) Schulz drew upon his childhood experiences as springboards for gags. He gained insight into these experiences by seeing them both as a child at the time and as an adult reflecting. List and briefly describe five childhood experiences. Choose one as a springboard for either two four-panel strips or a six to nine panel one-page strip using simple characters.