2000 First Place Argumentative Essay

Calvin and Hobbes: An Existentialist View

Faster and faster, the slick red wagon slaloms across the rocky terrain, carrying a blonde-headed boy and his stuffed tiger along each turn of the track. Calvin, an imaginative six year old who makes us laugh with his childish antics, and Hobbes, the philosophical stuffed tiger, both make a statement about the world they were created in. Calvin and Hobbes is essentially an existentialist comic strip. Through Calvin’s desperate and unique choices and circumstances, he untraditionally fights against a continually changing world. His actions portray the disorder in which we are all controlled in a meaningless existence against a ferocious society, a ruthless nature, and inevitable death.

Calvin is a unique character who breaks the traditionally accepted roles children play. John Calvin, the namesake of Bill Waterson’s star, was a stern, protestant theologian. Torn between conflicting doctrines of the Catholic Church, John Calvin led a Protestant reformation, breaking away from the traditionally accepted beliefs to more unorthodox beliefs such as predestination and justification by faith alone. No character could better reflect these Protestant views than the six-year old Calvin. An entirely mischievous and self-indulgent boy, Calvin is also forced into making new and desperate choices. John Calvin was forced into making a desperate choice to rebel against the mother church, facing excommunication because he chose not to believe in the widely accepted beliefs of the time. Calvin also protests the situations he encounters. He polls his father, rating him on his character and past performances. Calvin realizes that it is not issues and ideologies that matter, but the type of people we are. Making a choice on how we act and respond, even if it goes against the majority (Dad), is much more important than the actual choice.

Yet, despite his polls and his judgments, Calvin realizes that he is trapped in a world of chain reactions. In Existentialism, the choices we make are the result of prior choices, and each decision determines the range of the next choices we face. When plummeting down a hill in his speedy red wagon, Calvin arbitrarily chooses left. His first decision to even start down the hill creates a chain reaction of choices that ultimately leaves him jumping from a cliff into a river.

The cataclysms Calvin experiences result from forced blind decisions. As Existentialists see it, we have no control over our choices, because in making a choice we limit ourselves on any further choices we wish to make. We are unable to predict the outcome of our choices, and so these blind choices lead to an unknowable future. This human essence creates anxiety for each choice we make as we realize that all individuals are trapped into making a unique existence that ultimately differs from another’s choice; these desperate choices undermine our ability to choose wisely as the anxiety increases with the uncontrollable.

Calvin’s red wagon and oftentimes his slick sled are therefore the philosophical mediums used to convey a changing world and the choices we need to constantly make. The visual artwork undermines our fear as we realize that fate would have us all jumping from the cliffs that blind choices lead us to. Never knowing where we will end up creates an unpredictable existence completely unique to the individual and existentialist.

Calvin lives a unique existence surrounded by new circumstances that must be dealt with, resolved, and learned from, but never are. As Calvin seeks to resolve many of his problems in life, he makes another choice to not learn from his mistakes. He is constantly encountering morals which he bypasses for an easier solution. With a duplicator, Calvin makes five copies of himself, intending them to do his homework, go to school, and clean for
him. As each one turns into exact duplicates, possessing the same work ethics and ideologies, Calvin judges them all as perfect jerks. He finds his choice to make duplicates of himself results in more trouble for himself. In the final resolution, when all the duplicates have been turned to worms and the duplicating mess is over, Hobbes wants to know what valuable lesson they learned from their choice. Calvin thinks for a minute, and then responds with an exasperated, “Ok, so we didn’t learn any big lesson. Sue me” (Watterson 118) Hobbes response is, however, the true philosophy behind everything the two of them do. “Live and don’t learn, that’s us” (Watterson 118). Calvin’s attitude demonstrates one of the ways we can accept our plots in life. By ignoring the moral, his reasoning is powerless and his experiences pointless.

As Calvin fails to see the lesson behind the act, he is exposed to the existential battle between conformity and individualism. He is constantly fighting a battle of choices between his own will and that of some outside force. He must choose to conform to his parent’s wishes by taking baths, doing homework, going to school, and performing all of the accepted steps of life or loose television privileges. He must conform to Mrs. Wormwood at school, or else he will inevitably end up in the principal’s office. He is unable to be his true self, and in this way Calvin attaches himself to us; our rebelliousness is manifest through his actions, and the comic strip character becomes very personable.

A leading Existentialist, Jean-Paul Sartre, believed “each person is totally free and entirely responsible for what he or she becomes or does” (May 78). Yet, in the desperate choices Calvin is forced to make, we sympathize with him because he is not given the responsibility of becoming his own person. He portrays the individual as trapped into fulfilling the wills of an elite few. The desperateness of this situation makes us question each and every assumption we have about life. We compare our own situations to Calvin’s, and feel he understands the ironies of making a desperate forced decision.

The charm that draws us to the comic strip is the fact that Calvin doesn’t represent an essential human characteristic, but the spontaneous and unique response we are searching to find to our desperate circumstances. He is rebellious, trapped into fulfilling the commands of the elite, and, while we laugh at Calvin’s unpredictable situations, we are likewise forced into similar choices. His unbelievable sarcasm and defiance appeal to our inward sense of injustice; he makes our own desperate choices seem not so desperate. The extreme depiction of life as uncontrollable, where all perspective has been lost, brings us back into our own world, and makes us grateful not to be in Calvin’s existential shoes.

Calvin is not only forced into making the desperate choices each of us faces in life, but he also represents the rationalism that each person is alone and separated from society and self. Existentialist David Riesman termed this feeling the lonely crowd, the situation of being alone and isolated with oneself, even when surrounded by other people. He argues that we are all stuck in an elevator, rubbing elbows with the crowd, alone and unknown to those even closest to us (May 45).

Calvin mocks those who portray life as safe and secure with his snowmen. His modern art form depicts many of the fears and concerns alienated life generates in each one of us. He comments on the human condition, and feels it his obligation to say something significant. He wishes to express deeper truths about the human condition, mocking those who would depict the world as ordered.

(Official Website)

In his search for originality, Calvin’s snowmen come to portray the merciless attacks of society on the individual. Both of these relatively simple cartoons depict the helplessness of the individual, a quality of Existentialism. The snowmen are caught in a world of fear, as they can never move farther away from their aggressors. The cartoon depicts that we are literally held in the jaws of society, unable to escape and live, unable to even die. The crowd of individuals, all fleeing the same terror, realizes that the attack is real, and yet
each one must find their own escape. The purge of society is the inevitability to help each other or ourselves; we are trapped in the choices we have made and so alienated from each other that we cannot help each other escape those consequences; essentially, we’re “goners.” Just as the sharks move in on their prey, so does society close in on us. Calvin gives us a warning that each member of society will ultimately suffer the snowmen’s same fate.

Calvin’s snowmen also depict life as a meaningless existence. In one strip, one of Calvin’s snowmen is not very happy, and Hobbes is curious as to why. Calvin points out that he knows his existence is meaningless. It will be just a matter of time before the sun comes out and he melts. There is of course a comic ending to make us feel that life is not meaningless (there’s always TV), but at the same time, the fear that life might just be meaningless is introduced, nagging us. Knowing that life is transient and understanding our own horror of mortality leads to the alienation of self.

The ruthlessness of nature transcends beyond even Calvin’s artwork. His experiences with death and even suicide reflect the fear of a complete alienation of oneself. Walking along with Hobbes, Calvin chances upon a dead bird. Only once he sees the fragility of life does he realize the ruthlessness of nature. “Once it’s too late you appreciate what a miracle life is. You realize that nature is ruthless and our existence is very fragile, temporary, and precious” (Watterson 199). It confuses Calvin, who hopes one day to understand why people take life so thoughtlessly for granted.

Death is the final form of alienation. Realizing that the choices we make could unknowingly and unwillingly lead us closer to death scares the six-year old Calvin. It’s a scary thought that life can end at any moment, and an even scarier thought that at this current moment life is winding down. In this snow-sculpture, Calvin depicts the innate fear that death is coming and there’s nothing we can do to stop it. Existentialists fear the helplessness of the individual. The hot water bottle will slowly kill the snowman, and, knowing that death is coming while there’s nothing to stop it, completely alienates one from life itself.

(Official Website)

Calvin is the perpetual youth living the six-year old dream. His choices reflect our desires—he is the child that does and says everything we want to do. Yet, through Calvin’s experiences we learn about human nature: the fight against conformity and control, the desperate choices we are forced to make, and the alienation and meaningless existence of life. Because of our desperate choices, we move closer to the final form of alienation, death, while never understanding why. Yet, Calvin is able to allay those fears. He is a Peter Pan, a perpetual youth who we can look back on and admire throughout time, because he never has to face age. As he continues to rebel and persist against an existential world in his sarcastic and sardonic ways despite his circumstances and consequences, he sets an example of how to fight the irrational attacks on the individual.

Works Cited


