



Communication
Volume 2, Issue 1, Jan-Jun 2025, pp. 175-184

The Philosophical Beagle: A Content Analysis of Peanuts as a Commentary on a World of Chaos

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Received on: February 8, 2025 | Accepted on: April 14, 2025 | Published on: June 29, 2025

Abstract

This research paper examines the character of Snoopy from Charles M. Schulz's iconic comic strip *Peanuts* as a profound philosophical commentator on the human condition. Through a mixed-method approach involving content analysis and the application of theories from mass communication, literature, and popular culture studies, this paper argues that Snoopy's existence, particularly his rich internal life and diverse alter egos, serves as a poignant critique of existential anxieties, societal pressures, and the chaotic nature of the modern world. The study analyses recurring motifs, such as his rivalry with the Red Baron, his literary pursuits, and his complex relationship with his doghouse, to reveal how Schulz used this ostensibly simple beagle to explore themes of identity, escapism, and the search for meaning. Ultimately, the paper concludes that Snoopy is not merely a comic relief character but a central philosophical figure whose commentary on life's absurdity and beauty has resonated with generations, cementing *Peanuts* as a sophisticated work of popular art.

Keywords: Snoopy, *Peanuts*, Charles M. Schulz, popular culture, mass communication,

1. Introduction: The World Through a Beagle's Eyes

Charles M. Schulz's *Peanuts*, a comic strip that ran for nearly 50 years, is often remembered for its deceptively simple, childlike world. Yet, beneath the surface of playground mishaps, unrequited loves, and philosophical musings from a cast of prepubescent children lies a complex and deeply philosophical commentary on life. While Charlie Brown's perpetual anxiety and Lucy's cynical psychoanalysis are well-documented sources of the strip's emotional depth, it is the character of Snoopy, the beagle, who provides the most extensive and multi-layered perspective on the chaotic world of human existence. Snoopy is more than a dog; he is an artist, a writer, a war hero, a doctor, an attorney, a detective, and a gourmand. His acts as the Cheshire Beagle, the tennis star, or the masked Marvel hero lend him the layers that transform a simple dog into a complex personality.

His alter egos and internal monologues are not random gags, but sophisticated and sustained exploration of individuality, escapism, and the search for meaning in a world that often seems absurd and indifferent. This paper posits that Snoopy's adventures and inner life function as a cohesive philosophical framework, offering a unique and profound commentary on the human condition that has allowed *Peanuts* to endure as a cultural touchstone (Inge, 2000).

This research will analyze Snoopy's multifaceted character, focusing on how he circumnavigates the ails of a human-dominated world. His life, lived on top of a doghouse rather than inside it, is a constant act of rebellion against his predetermined role as a pet. He refuses to be confined to being a stereotyped or being boxed inside with no view of the world. This rebellion is a central theme, manifesting in his grand fantasies and intellectual pursuits. Drawing upon a content analysis of key narrative arcs and recurring themes, this study will apply various theoretical lenses from mass communication and literary and popular culture studies to reveal Schulz's genius. By examining Snoopy through these frameworks, we can better understand how a comic strip, a seemingly ephemeral form of popular culture, can serve as a catalyst for profound philosophical and social commentary, with the beagle acting as our guide through a world of chaos.

2. Literature Review: Theoretical Frameworks for a Beagle's World

The academic study of *Peanuts* is surprisingly vast, with scholarship ranging from sociological analyses to literary criticism. Stephen J. Lind's *A Charlie Brown Religion* (2015) offers one of the most scholarly treatments of Charles M. Schulz's spiritual imagination, and it gives Snoopy a distinctive place within that moral-philosophical landscape. While not a monograph exclusively about Snoopy, Lind shows how the beagle functions as a flexible vehicle for expressing Schulz's recurring concerns—hope, resilience, ambivalence about institutional religion, and the everyday ethics of kindness and failure (Lind, 2015). Anchored in archival correspondence, production histories, and interviews, Lind situates Snoopy's many alter egos (the Flying Ace, Joe Cool, the “literary beagle”) as dramaturgical frames through which Schulz could explore existential questions without didacticism (Lind, 2015). In this reading, Snoopy's buoyant self-confidence and imagination are not fantastic embellishments but narrative instruments that mediate the strip's deeper human themes.

Methodologically, Lind's evidentiary base is a major strength. He cross-references strips with broadcast scripts, merchandising choices, and Schulz's public statements to map intention against reception (Lind, 2015). This triangulation helps clarify a persistent puzzle in *Peanuts*

scholarship: why the strip reads as gentle children's humour while rustling in complex theological and ethical strains. Snoopy's fantasies—especially the Flying Ace's repeated defeats—become case studies in what Lind calls Schulz's "everyday soteriology," a practical grammar of endurance where grace looks like getting back on the doghouse to try again (Lind, 2015). Compared with biographical narratives that foreground Schulz's melancholy (Michaelis, 2007), Lind's analysis gives fuller weight to Snoopy's counteracting energy: "joy and eros," in Umberto Eco's famous formulation—without romanticizing it (Eco, 1985).

A key contribution is Lind's account of Snoopy's cultural pliability in religiously inflected public spheres. The beagle's adoption by NASA (the Silver Snoopy Award; Apollo 10's module names) exemplifies how a figure born in comic-strip ambivalence could become a secular-sacred icon of aspiration and safety (Lind, 2015). Lind argues that Snoopy's charm and irony enabled Schulz to approach national anxiety—war, technological risk, social change—through a character whose nonhuman status softened resistance while preserving moral bite. This complements M. Thomas Inge's cultural histories by specifying the spiritual semantics at work in Snoopy's visual grammar (Inge, 2000).

Still, there are limitations. Because the monograph's establishing question is religion, Lind sometimes brackets adjacent revelatory lenses—disability studies, affect theory, or media-industry economics—that could deepen Snoopy's psychology (e.g., repetitive fantasy as coping) or clarify how commercial logics amplified certain Snoopy personas over others (Eco, 1985; Michaelis, 2007). The discussion of gender is also relatively light; given Joe Cool's performance of coolness and disinterest, a closer engagement with gendered play would strengthen the account. Finally, while Lind is careful not to reduce Schulz to doctrinal categories, the emphasis on spirituality occasionally risks underplaying how gag structure, panel pacing, and merchandising feedback loops shaped Snoopy's evolution (Inge, 2000; Michaelis, 2007). This paper seeks to bridge that gap by applying a more rigorous theoretical approach.

From a mass communication perspective, *Peanuts* can be analysed through the lens of Framing theory. Entman (1993) argues that media frames tell us "what's important" and "how to think about it." The strip frames the complex emotional lives of children and a dog in a simple, four-panel structure, making existential and social issues digestible for a mass audience. Schulz's framing, particularly through Snoopy's imaginative escapades, reframes the mundane as a stage for epic drama. The doghouse, for example, is not a simple shelter but a World War I battlefield, an artist's studio, and a sophisticated library. This reframing allows readers to escape the immediate anxieties of their own lives and contemplate broader themes of courage, creativity, and self-worth.

The concept of Cultivation theory (Gerbner et al., 1980) also provides a useful framework. While this theory typically focuses on the long-term effects of media consumption on a person's perception of reality, it can be applied to understand how *Peanuts*, through its persistent themes of failure and resilience, cultivated a shared cultural vocabulary for discussing disappointment and human foibles. Snoopy, in this context, acts as an antidote to the strip's pervasive anxieties. He cultivates a belief in the power of imagination and the importance of finding joy in small victories, such as a well-written letter or a perfectly toasted marshmallow.

Literary theory, particularly postmodernism and existentialism, is crucial for a deeper understanding of Snoopy's character. His multitude of personas—the World War I Flying Ace,

Joe Cool, the literary critic—is a classic example of fragmented identity, a core tenet of postmodern thought (Hutcheon, 1988). Snoopy's constant shifting of roles suggests that a singular, fixed identity is not only limiting but perhaps a falsehood in itself. The dog's struggle to write the "Great American Novel," perpetually starting with "It was a dark and stormy night," is a meta-commentary on the creative process and the anxiety of influence (Bloch, 1989). This self-referential humour is a hallmark of postmodern literature. Furthermore, Snoopy's existence, as a being conscious of his own consciousness, is a deeply existentialist one. He is defined by his actions and choices, not by his biology as a dog. His constant battle against his "dog-ness" is a search for self-definition in a meaningless universe, a theme explored by Sartre and Camus (Sartre, 1946).

Finally, Popular Culture theory positions *Peanuts* not as a mere distraction but as a vital cultural artifact that both reflects and shapes social discourse. Comic strips have been shown to be significant indicators of a society's values and anxieties (Goulart, 2001). Snoopy's popularity, particularly during the turbulent 1960s and 70s, suggests that his escapist fantasies and unyielding optimism provided a necessary counterbalance to the national chaos of the time—the Vietnam War, political assassinations, and social unrest. His persona as the Flying Ace, a figure of heroic but often futile resistance, became a potent symbol for a generation grappling with the failures of modern warfare and idealism.

3. Scope of Research: The Beagle's Universe

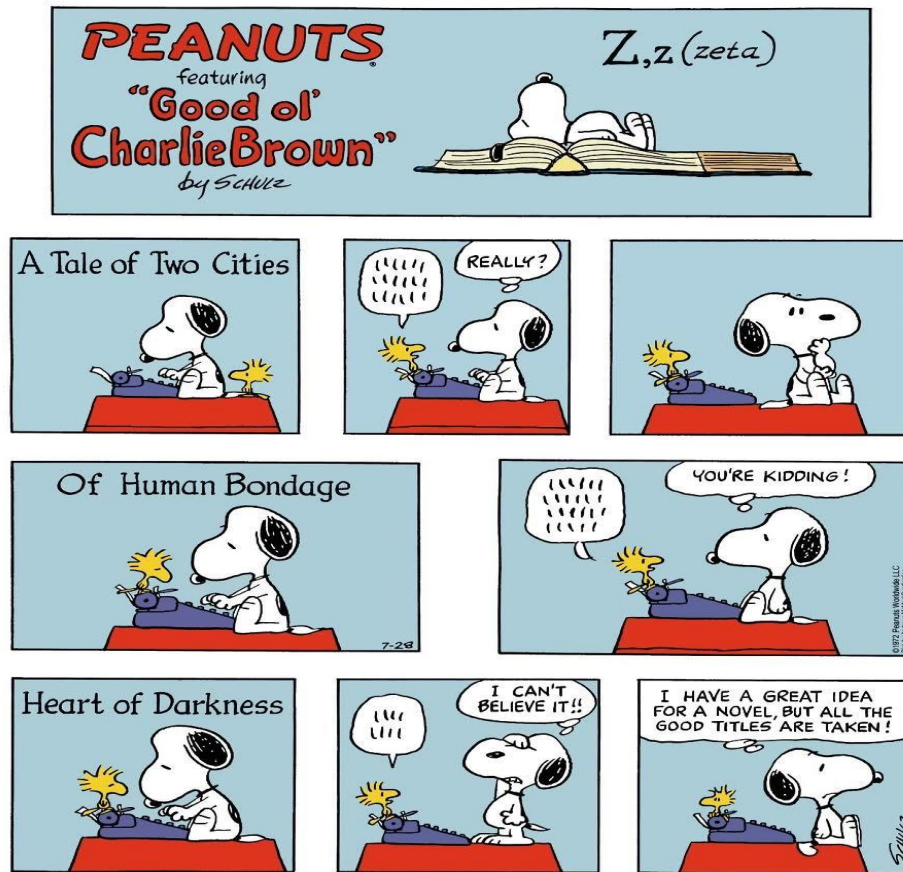
The focus of this research is a content analysis of the character Snoopy, his development, and his interactions with the world of *Peanuts*. While the comic strip contains a rich ecosystem of characters and themes, this paper will center on Snoopy as the primary philosophical lens. The analysis will be limited to the original comic strip run by Charles M. Schulz and will draw on iconic, recurring narratives. Specifically, this paper will focus on three key areas of Snoopy's philosophical output:

1. **The Soldier and the Escapist:** The World War I Flying Ace persona and his imaginary battles with the Red Baron. This persona will be analysed for its commentary on heroism, defeat, and the creative use of escapism to cope with an uncontrollable external world. Pic1.1 is a case in point where after being hit he plans to be a commercial pilot and escape the brutalities of war.



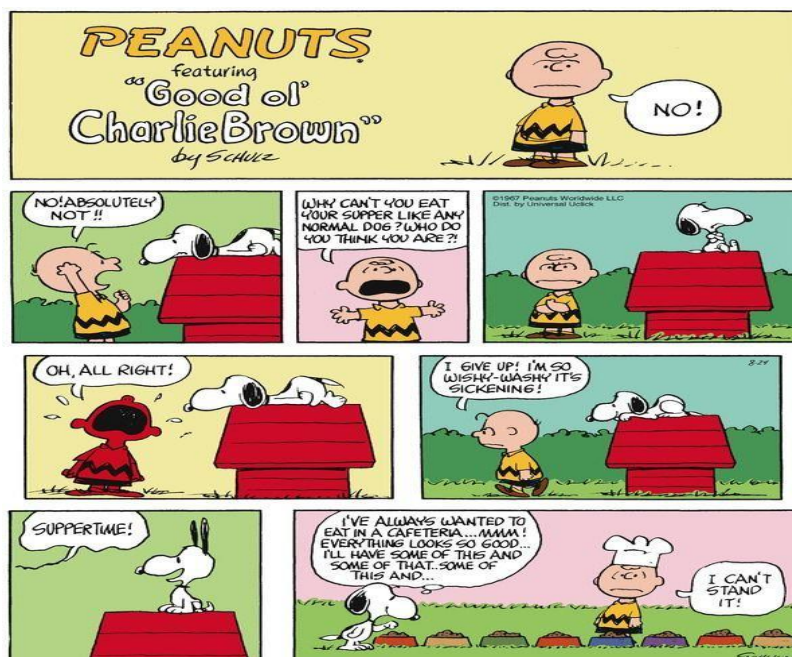
Pic1.1 Snoopy as the pilot (Credit Peanuts comic strip)

2. **The Artist and the Intellectual:** Snoopy's literary pursuits, from his struggles to write a novel to his role as a literary critic, will be examined. This aspect will be used to explore themes of creative ambition, the search for validation, and the universal frustrations of the artistic process. As Pic 1.2 shows how he can't start his novel as all the names he thought of are taken



Pic 1.2: Snoopy as the intellectual (Credit Peanuts comic strip)

3. **The Dog and the Iconoclast:** Snoopy's relationship with his doghouse and his rejection of traditional "dog-ness." This will be used to explore his philosophical stance on identity, personal freedom, and the subversion of expectations. Pic 1.3 casts Snoopy as someone who wants to eat far from his doghouse in a cafeteria where he can pick and choose his food.



Pic 1.3: Snoopy as an iconoclast (Credit Peanuts comic strip)

The research will not extend to the animated specials, merchandising, or other derivative works, as these may not always accurately reflect Schulz's original intent and philosophical voice. By concentrating on the source material, this paper aims to provide a focused and authentic analysis of the character as conceived by his creator.

4. Research Analysis: The Beagle as Philosopher

4.1 The World War I Flying Ace: Heroism, Defeat, and a Commentary on a Chaotic World

Snoopy's most famous alter ego, the World War I Flying Ace, provides a rich field for philosophical inquiry and social commentary. Sitting atop his doghouse, which he imagines as a Sopwith Camel fighter plane, Snoopy wages an eternal, solitary war against the unseen, all-powerful enemy, the Red Baron. This narrative is a masterclass in escapism as a coping mechanism, but it is also a direct commentary on the tumultuous era of the 1960s and 1970s. The chaotic, threatening world outside the strip—the world of the Vietnam War, political assassinations, and social unrest—is sublimated into a fantastical, albeit dangerous, conflict. This form of escapism is not a rejection of reality but a profound act of psychological survival (Freud, 1917).

By creating his own war, Snoopy can control the terms of the battle, even if he almost always ends in defeat. The Red Baron is never seen, a powerful symbol of the abstract, uncontrollable forces that govern our lives—fate, chance, or simply a chaotic universe. This resonates deeply with the feeling of helplessness experienced by a generation watching a distant war unfold on television, a war that seemed to lack a clear purpose or a visible enemy. Snoopy's repeated failures ("Curse you, Red Baron!") are not a source of lasting despair. Instead, they are a testament to his indomitable spirit. He will return to the fight, a new day, a new battle, a new flight. This cyclical, Sisyphean struggle reflects a core existentialist belief: meaning is not found in victory but in the persistent act of striving itself (Camus, 1942). Snoopy's heroism is not defined by his success but by his refusal to give up. This makes him a more effective and more relevant as a hero than many traditional figures.

Snoopy's post-battle routines further deepen this commentary. When his imaginary plane is shot down, he often finds himself at a "French café," which is, in reality, his doghouse. Here, he sips root beer and reflects on the battle, a touching symbol of a desire for peace and normalcy in a world in a state of constant conflict. This dichotomy between the violence of his imagination and the quiet contentment of his idle time provides a powerful critique of war's psychological toll. He is a soldier who yearns for the simple pleasures of life—a cup of coffee, a moment of quiet contemplation—a sentiment that resonated with many during a time when the human cost of conflict was a daily reality.

4.2 The Artist and the Intellectual: A Commentary on the Struggle for Meaning

Snoopy's intellectual and artistic pursuits offer a satirical and insightful commentary on the artistic process and the American obsession with self-improvement and success. He is perpetually a "starving artist," typing away on a typewriter while sitting atop his doghouse, a visual metaphor for his precarious creative perch. His opening line, "It was a dark and stormy night," is a running gag, a testament to writer's block and the struggle for originality. This

satirical portrayal of the artist-figure is a clever way for Schulz to comment on the romanticized image of the tortured genius.

Beyond his writing, Snoopy's many other alter egos—the world-famous tennis player, the doctor, the attorney—are all manifestations of a deep-seated desire for recognition and a constant negotiation with his own sense of self-worth. His failures in these roles, however, provide a powerful critique of the pressure to excel in every field. When he loses a tennis match, he simply laments, "I'm going to have to get myself a new racket," rather than succumbing to despair. When a patient, Charlie Brown, questions his medical advice, Snoopy simply closes his doctor's office. This resilience in the face of failure offers a refreshing perspective on a culture that often equates self-worth with success. Snoopy's artistic and professional endeavors are, in this sense, a way of making sense of a chaotic world. The act of creating and striving, even if it is a failed attempt, is an assertion of agency and an attempt to impose order on a disorderly reality. His creative endeavors, therefore, are a form of philosophical work—a search for truth and beauty in the face of futility.

4.3 The Dog and the Iconoclast: A Rejection of Predetermined Identity

Snoopy's relationship with his doghouse is perhaps the most profound and sustained philosophical statement in the entire strip. He refuses to sleep inside it, instead opting to sleep on its roof, and when asked why, he offers no clear answer. The doghouse itself, a symbol of domesticity and a dog's "proper place," is an object of constant subversion. The interior, though never seen by the reader in the strip's early run, is a space of mystery and imagination. When it does appear, it is a TARDIS-like space, filled with priceless art and other treasures. The doghouse is not a confinement; it is a space of infinite potential, a symbol of the mind's ability to create an inner world that is richer and more complex than the outer one. Snoopy's refusal to conform to the expectations of "dog-ness" is an act of **iconoclasm**, a rejection of his assigned identity. He walks on two feet, plays baseball, and communicates with thought bubbles, all of which distance him from his canine biology. He is a beagle who refuses to be a beagle.

This is a core existentialist theme: that existence precedes essence, and one is free to define oneself through one's own actions and choices (Sartre, 1946). Snoopy's rejection of his essence as a dog and his self-creation of a myriad of complex identities is a powerful philosophical argument for personal freedom and self-determination in a world that often seeks to categorize and contain us. His fascination with food, from his imaginary alter ego as a vulture awaiting a meal to his unwavering love for pizza, is also a commentary on the simple pleasures and absurdities of life. He is a character who finds joy in the most mundane moments, a reminder to his audience to find happiness in the small, everyday details.

5. Conclusion: The Beagle's Legacy

In conclusion, the character of Snoopy is far more than a beloved cartoon dog; he is a complex philosophical figure whose existence in the world of *Peanuts* provides a profound and enduring commentary on the human condition. Through a content analysis of his major narratives, this paper has shown how Charles M. Schulz utilized Snoopy to explore themes of identity, escapism, artistic frustration, and the search for meaning in a world marked by chaos. The application of theoretical frameworks from mass communication, literature, and popular culture has revealed that Snoopy's adventures as the World War I Flying Ace are not mere escapist fantasies but a heroic struggle against abstract forces, a Sisyphean pursuit of meaning

in defeat. His literary ambitions are a powerful satire on the creative process and the universal desire for artistic validation. Finally, his iconoclastic relationship with his doghouse and his very nature as a dog who refuses to be a dog is a potent existentialist statement on the freedom to define oneself against the confines of a predetermined identity.

Ultimately, Snoopy's legacy is his ability to articulate the most complex human emotions and philosophical dilemmas through the deceptively simple medium of a comic strip. He shows us that even in a world of constant chaos, anxiety, and unfulfilled desires, there is immense value in imagination, creativity, and the simple act of trying. His philosophy is one of resilient optimism, a reminder that even when the Red Baron wins, there is always another day to fly. He is the quiet philosopher, the beagle who taught a generation of readers how to live, not just as a dog, but as a person, and in doing so, he cemented *Peanuts* as a timeless work of art and cultural commentary (Kunz, 2021).

The brilliance of Schulz's commentary lies in its delivery. By using a non-human character, he was able to transcend political and social divides, offering a perspective that was universally relatable. Snoopy's animal nature provided a blank canvas for the audience to project their own experiences and anxieties, making his commentary on war, art, and identity all the more powerful. He could be a soldier, an artist, or a rebel without ever alienating readers who held different views. Snoopy's dog-centric view of the world—where the simple things like a good meal or a comfortable nap are triumphs—provided a much-needed counterbalance to the over-the-top drama and turmoil of the human world. This stripped-down, honest perspective on life allowed *Peanuts* to emerge as a truly timeless and profound work of popular art.

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