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**‘Childish transgressions in *Doraemon*’:
the moral voids of Nobita Nobi**

ABSTRACT

*Children’s perceptions of life are often deeply serious. Children experience aspects of life that are beyond their immediate comprehension. In this sense they experience moral voids. Nobita Nobi, the innocent seeming hero of the popular Japanese anime and manga, Doraemon, often has experiences that go beyond the usual understandings of childish normality. In his frequent fan service and more style glimpses of his girlfriend Shizuka’s panties, Nobita sometimes experiences moral voids that are reminiscent of accounts of childhood in major literature such as Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*. Childish as he may be, Nobita lives in a world of desires and these desires present him with metaphysical moments that indicate transitional and transgressive features of latency.*

KEYWORDS

anime
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The worlds of children are serious worlds. Serious in the sense that children are hard up against realities that are not of their making; realities that have logics that children are yet to discover. As Stephane Delorme ponders, in her reflections on ‘childish perceptions’ in anime: ‘How does a child come to terms with something beyond his comprehension?’ Frequently, children find they are ‘on the edge of a metaphysical void’. This void is just there in the worlds of children, and in just being there, it is always dramatic: ‘the drama of children undergoing trauma, which they perceive as enormous and insurmountable, is always ultimately the drama of time, the fact that the past cannot be put to rights’ (2010: 261).

We can clearly see this serious kind of metaphysical drama in much anime and manga (Delorme cites many examples including, *Grave of the Fireflies* (1998), *Barefoot Gen* (1983), *Brave Story* (2006), *Haibane Renmai* (2002), and *Paprika* (2006)). Before exploring the lighter (and possibly more transgressive) side of the existential traumas of childhood in

the children's manga and anime, *Doraemon*, it is important to comparatively ground certain aspects of what Delorme describes rightly as 'childhood perceptions' within the details of more readily recognized and accepted 'great literature'. That is, we need to establish features of darker dramas that can illustrate and help us conceptually model the potential depths of the childish and intrinsically comic events that typify *Doraemon*.

In William Faulkner's novel, *The Sound and the Fury*, Benjy, the idiot, recalls: 'She was wet. We were playing in the [river] branch and Caddy squatted down and got her dress wet . . . Caddy took her dress off and threw it on the bank. Then she didn't have on anything but her bodice and drawers . . .' ([April 17th, 1928] 1959: 15, 16). And, later: 'He went and pushed Caddy up into the tree to the first limb. We watched the muddy bottom of her drawers. Then we couldn't see her' ([April 17th, 1928] 1959: 37).

Those watching 'the muddy bottom of her drawers' include Caddy's three brothers: Quentin, Jason and Benjy. Caddy, aged seven, is climbing the tree to prove to her brothers that what is going on inside the house is a party and not part of a funeral. The chorus (they can comment on the Compton family drama but not change it) of 'negro' servants and their children has already clearly confirmed that what is going on is a wake for the Compton children's grandmother, but the white children are unable to enter this traumatic void directly. For the Compton boys, this image of Caddy's muddy drawers, this childhood perception, becomes the figure that marks the boys' entry into a metaphysical world of sex and death; a world where time moves in one direction. Subsequently, Quentin, a little older than Caddy, in his adolescence and young adulthood, is unable to deal with the realities of his sister's sexuality. He grows up disturbed and kills himself at college; Jason, a little younger than Caddy, grows up to be a moral eunuch only capable of aggression; Benjy, the youngest and last of his tribe, forever wails for the loss of his sister's innocence ('she smelled like trees') and for the loss of his manhood (he is later castrated).

That so much should depend on such a seemingly trivial detail is a mark of Faulkner's genius as well as a mark of the reality of childhood metaphysical experiences. That is, Faulkner is underwriting the significance of the perceptions of childhood as markers of major metaphysical moments worthy of the weight of Greek tragedy. When Dilsey, the African American housekeeper, finds Caddy up the tree, looking in at the wake, she says: 'You, Satan . . . Come down from there' (1959: 43). As Caddy emerges from the tree, so the moral world of the children is changed forever. A new reality has been established within the narrative.

If we follow the image of a young girl's drawers or panties into the realms of anime and manga, then we can observe, in Fujiko F. Fujio's *Doraemon*, an example of a similar kind of metaphysical void or problem. Nobita Nobi, the hero of *Doraemon*, is another idiot. Unlike Benji, Nobita is not mentally impaired; rather he is a bumbling and inept hero who is often described as an idiot because of his failure to pay proper attention to the world of facts and social constraints. Nobita doesn't want to grow up; he wants to explore the dimensions of fantasy and make-believe that appeal to him.

As pointed out by Stefano Gariglio, the *Doraemon* 'series is set in a universe where time stands still; the characters do not grow old and their adventures are unconnected, sometimes even contradictory' (2010: 50). His fantastic adventures take him to many other times and places; his willing engagements with worlds of fantasy and magic present him with many splendid things including dinosaurs and creatures from outer space; they also present him with knowledge of his own unexpected inner space. That is, while the moral world that Nobita inhabits remains that of the latency period, a period in which there is a high level of general stability, his world does not lack an internal aspect of time: within an individual episode or story, he experiences dramatic moments that have implications of psychological knowledge and growth; in his frequently comical ontological transgressions, Nobita sometimes experiences other darker transgressions. For example, Nobita finds himself, in 'Nobita's Great Adventure into the Underworld', accidentally, causing the skirt of his girlfriend, Shizuka to lift and reveal her panties. This first pantie incident occurs as a result of Nobita experimenting with the magic of raising objects. According to *Doraemon*, the magic cat from the future who enables Nobita's fantasies, every magic is based on the ability to float an object in the air (*Daichohen-Doraemon*, Vol. 5, 2004: 45). Here what gets raised is not the pebbles that Nobita attempts to elevate, but Shizuka's skirt. The basic magic, or dark art, in the Underworld, that is presented here, is the magic of the mind and its ability to project inner desires onto the outer world without these desires having previously been brought to conscious attention. In terms of Plato's *Meno*, this is the recovery of lost knowledge; in Freudian terms, it is a slip that reveals an unconscious desire; in terms of fantasy, it is the capacity of the imagination to generate the imaginary reality needed for the manifestation of what was not there before. This, in itself, is void enough!

Just as Benji and his brothers are drawn into a larger and encompassing psychological drama by their observing their sister's muddy drawers within a realized drama so Nobita is drawn into his own larger and developing psychological drama by his being witness to the unexpected outcome of his own desire to control the world of his imagining.

Here the power of fantasy has exceeded the grounds of the fantasy: Nobita just wanted to experience magic. This exceeding has, for the moment, only taken place in one of Nobita's magic worlds. That is, Shizuka, in the real world of *Doraemon*, is unaware that Nobita, in one of his dreamings, has lifted her skirt. Many pages later, the final frame in this adventure features Nobita and his two naughty buddies, Jylan (Gian, the giant and bully, who is only afraid of his mother) and Suneo (the wealthy, bed-wetting fox-faced creep). In this frame, Nobita is back in the real world of the manga, at the local vacant block. Here he attempts to practice one of the dark arts that he has acquired within the dream: the one that causes Shizuka's skirt to elevate. Seemingly his magic works; her skirt is elevated revealing her panties.

The responses of Nobita's buddies are typical of *moe* scenes of embarrassment through pleasure that have become a regular feature of Fanservice (the gratuitous display of panties, leg spreads and breasts) within anime and manga (see Russell 2009: 95). The only thing missing is speech balloons with 'Moe'. The two versions of Nobita, one (in scene) surprised and embarrassed (Shizuka is merely startled), one looking out at the readers (from an editorial frame) with a sly wink, indicate a void. Nobita has achieved a desired state (revealing Shizuka's panties in the real world) but this looked for drama has failed Nobita by exceeding his intentions. He does not actually see her panties; what he sees is his buddies seeing her panties. While he has come to realize the potency, for him, of elevating Shizuka's skirt and seeing her panties, in the real world of the manga, Nobita cannot control the consequences. Watching his naughty buddies respond with sheer delight is a kind of complication that opens up yet another void. Not only has Nobita come to recognize, through fantasy, that he desires to see Shizuka's panties, but in the real world he has to come to terms with the fact that his desire is a desire shared with his buddies and hence with possibly all males. In the editorial frame, Nobita introduces yet a further complication: if it was the wind that lifted the skirt, providing the opportunity for glimpsing, then such moments of seeing panties are always already available. That is, his desire, now known, is found to be underwritten by reality: he wants to see Shizuka's panties; her panties are available for seeing.

Popular culture has its own time-lines. Looking backwards, the landscape is extraordinarily well defined. But, where things come from, nobody quite knows. Readers of manga establish their own histories of engagement, which then lead to their own versions of when and how things changed, when and how concepts formed, when and how particular events became more than incidents and emerged as memes. The history of *panchira* (panty

glimpse) seems clear enough. According to Japanese sources, the innocent portrayal of panties started with Machiko Hasegawa's popular comic strip *Sazae-san*, (Akihara & Takekuma 2002: 57-58) where the child character Wakame Isono is drawn with a childishly brief hemline. For most readers and viewers, their introduction to *panchira* started with 'Tezuka Osamu's up skirt shots of Tetsuwan Atomu's sister Uran, and [or] *Doraemon*'s Nobita flipping up Shizuka's skirt' (Galbraith 2009: 184). Moving from these innocent glimpses to the more elaborate perversities of current examples we need some guidance to help us understand what cultural values and psychological insights have been made available through this meme.

In an early *Doraemon* manga from the 1970s (vol. 2 ep. 12), we get to see an innocent enough panty shot. The skirt of Nobita Nobi's girlfriend, Shizuka Minamoto, is uplifted by the magic mini-typhoon, Huko. On a close reading of this story we can see many of the underlying theological and psychological concerns that progressively arise in the subsequent developments of *Doraemon*. Here Nobita does not seem to desire the panty shoot; he does not seem to anticipate the *moe* moment. Nobita simply wishes to hatch an egg and nurture something ('care for it from the heart' 2004: 105) like Shizuka nurtured and tamed a bird.

As happens with most of Nobita's innocent wishes, things go very wrong. *Doraemon* produces an egg, but the egg turns out to be a min-typhoon. The innocent fears of Nobita, that typhoons can destroy even his own family home, and his innocent desires to connect, through his heart, with the world, merge in the unexpected moment of Huko lifting Shizuka's skirt. At the end of the story, outside the dimension of fantasy, Nobita sees a flurry of spinning fallen leaves. He reflects: 'Now whenever I see a whirlwind, I remember' (2004: 112). Whirlwinds of the heart (pleasure principle) exist and disrupt human relationships (the psychological dimension) just as typhoons of nature exist (reality principle) and potentially can destroy the family home (the theological dimension).

Many episodes in *Doraemon* end with and or feature the local vacant block that provides the stage for the conclusion of the Underworld episode discussed above. The void is always somewhere nearby in *Doraemon*. Just as the min-whirlwind will always remind Nobita of the potential for desire to disrupt reality, so the ever-present wasteland of the local vacant lot will always be available for childish and latency period realities to emerge without the overview of adults. When Shizuka is exposed to a group glimpse, the children are on the vacant lot. When not in some fantastic world, and when not at home or school, the children are mostly portrayed playing on this lot. This is the children's domain where children's

business can be transacted. It is like the river bank of the Compton children. Bill Henson, an internationally renowned and contentious Australian photographer of adolescence, has this to say about such wastelands: ‘. . . intervals in the landscape, the no man’s land between one thing and another . . . like the vacant lot between the shopping mall and the petrol station is where teenagers . . . naturally go to muck around . . .’ (Henson 2005).

As seen in *Doraemon*, not only teenagers inhabit these transitional spaces. The experience, of moral and psychological freedom, that Henson is alluding to, is found here in the wasteland, not in fantasy but in a part of the world that adults simply do not attend to. Adults simply don’t care that young people hang around in these nowhere lands. As in Faulkner’s *Sound and Fury*, these spaces function as moral voids. Here things are exposed but as Delorme points out, ‘the past cannot be put to rights’. There is no undoing of what has been done. Nobita cannot un-see his friends glimpsing his future wife’s panties. Nobita is caught in time even if only for the time of this immediate drama; his actions and reactions implicate him and his readers in a climax that is subversive, in the case of ‘Huko’, and perverse in the case of the ‘Nobita’s Great Adventure into the Underworld’. In both dramas, the metaphysical cannot be evaded; there is an undeniable void. Nobita perceives himself in a world of desires where such desires are for and with others. His latency is inherently transitional and transgressive; Nobita is not simply a child.

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