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A Note on the Names of Selected Characters and Villains in *Dick Tracy*

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This article provides a brief history of the comic strip *Dick Tracy* (1931) and its creator, author, and illustrator Chester Gould (1900-1985). Gould was very inventive and creative in naming the characters that populated his strip. He provided distinctive names to the rogues that populated his strip. Their names reflected physical, psychological, or behavioral traits that emphasized deviance as a way to distinguish them from honest, hardworking citizens. In the 1930s and 1940s, the villains in *Dick Tracy* were distinctive and unique because of their idiosyncratic traits. The main characters also had unique names that represented positive traits. Minorities likewise had names that were stereotypic in nature. The comic strip regained its popularity in 1990 with the release of the very successful Disney movie "*Dick Tracy*".

KEYWORDS Comics, Comic strip characters, Fictional names, Minorities, Name meaning, The film *Dick Tracy*

In 1931, Chester Gould (1900–1985) drew a trial cartoon strip entitled *Plainclothes Tracy*, which he submitted to Joseph Patterson, the publisher of the New York News Syndicate and President of the Chicago Tribune-NY News Syndicate, who suggested a name change to *Dick Tracy*. On October 12 1931, the detective strip began its ongoing run. Gould would write and draw his strip until his retirement in 1977 when artist Rick Fletcher (1916–1983) and writer Max Allan Collins (1948–) were chosen to continue the detective strip. Upon Fletcher's death, Dick Locher (1929–), Pulitzer Prize winning editorial cartoonist (1982), assumed the artistic duties of *Dick Tracy*.

Gould won the highly coveted and prestigious Reuben award for Cartoonist of the Year given by the National Cartoonist Society for print cartoonists twice (1959, 1977). The award itself is named for Rube Goldberg (1883–1970), first president of the National Cartoonist Society in 1946, and Pulitzer Prize winner (1948) for his political cartoons. Ultimately, the *Dick Tracy* brand became a major entertainment franchise with radio and television series, feature films, cartoons, comic books, a video game, and various collectible products featuring the detective and characters from the strip (dolls, guns, lunch buckets, cameras, wrist watches, and so forth; see Crouch and Doucet, 1990).

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The name of the strip and its protagonist, Dick Tracy, derive from the common slang term for a detective, namely, "dick," a shortened form of "detective." The surname Tracy, of course, is derived from the verb "to trace" since certain detectives are involved in tracing lost persons, among other duties. Some of Tracy's police associates included Pat Patton and Chief Brandon, and Sam Catchem (= "catch them," 1949). His girlfriend and wife (in 1948) was an "All American girl" whose name, Tess Trueheart, depicted her loyalty to Tracy. In 1944, a rustic character and owner of a gravel pit, Gravel Gertie, appeared in a plot. Less than a year later (1945), a second rural character B[urt] O[scar] Plenty is involved in another story line. Gertie and Plenty subsequently marry and have a child, born in 1947, named Sparkle Plenty, the second wife of Junior Tracy (1932). These characters' names refer respectively to bathing habits, occupation, and physical beauty.

Dick Tracy originated during a time of exceptional lawlessness in the US that included the rise of organized crime and many highly publicized criminals such as Bonnie and Clyde, John Dillinger, Pretty Boy Floyd, Ma Barker, and others. These outlaw types appeared in the early strips, and its characters were drawn from real life, albeit with name changes. The strip evolved over the years, and the plots always reflected the times (The Great Depression, WWII, the Silent Generation, moon exploration, and so forth).

Dick Tracy is always depicted as a no-nonsense, ultra-conservative law enforcement agent who employs the latest technology to combat crime. In the early years of the strip, he and his police associates paid little heed to the constitutional rights of the accused. In later strips, he constantly bemoaned the fact that criminals had too many rights and were always able to escape just punishment because of legal "loopholes" provided by unscrupulous lawyers. In many ways, the traditionalist attitudes of the strip's main protagonist reflected those of his creator. With the passage of time and the advent of major cultural changes in the 1960s, the strip became less popular with younger readers precisely because of its traditionalist values. Moreover, some farfetched plots of the mid-1960s contributed to a diminution of the strip's popularity. Berger (1973, 112–132) devotes a chapter to Dick Tracy in his volume *The Comic-Stripped American*, which addresses the authoritarian nature of the main character.

In the strips of the 1930s, the villains in *Dick Tracy* are literally "ripped from the headlines." They represent authentic gangsters and mobsters of that era. This was a period when organized crime began to take hold by selling illegal alcohol during the "prohibition era" with the passage of the eighteenth amendment in 1919 and its subsequent repeal with the twenty-first amendment in 1933. Prominent among the mobsters was "Scarface" Al Capone (1899–1947) whose home base was the Chicago suburb of Cicero, Illinois, and who was ultimately imprisoned for income tax evasion.

A second type of criminal included the "freelance" gangsters who captured the popular imagination with their audacious criminal deeds chronicled in the headlines of many daily newspapers. These included, for example, John Dillinger (1903–1934), infamous for his escape from an Indiana prison with a homemade gun, and his ultimate death at the hands of police outside the Biograph Theater in Chicago. Kate "Ma" Barker (1873–1935) was another outlaw of the time. The popular, albeit

erroneous, depiction of her as the leader of the "Barker-Karpis gang" continues to this day. The Barker part of this gang included Kate Barker and her sons as well as Alvin "Creepie Karpis" Karpowicz (1907–1979) who were involved in a multi-year crime spree from 1931–1935. This brief historical note is important since Chester Gould incorporated these real-life criminals into *Dick Tracy* under the guise of pseudonyms, albeit clearly recognizable ones. Many other people from that era were also included, e.g., Texas Guinan (1884–1933), a popular Vaudeville performer and movie actor, who co-owned a famous nightclub in New York named "El Fay" with a hooligan named Larry Fay, an individual with a questionable past.

In *The Study of Names: An Introduction to the Principles and Topics* (Nuessel, 1992: 39–40), there is a very brief section entitled "Names of Famous Comic Strip Villains" that deals, in part, with this topic. The present note provides a more detailed and amplified account of these names, and others.

Berger (1973, 121) states that "[p]eople are either good or bad and are identified as such. Naming a character after his particular vice is an old technique borrowed from morality plays." The villains in *Dick Tracy* are usually depicted by their behavioral tics, personality disorders, physical distortions, or other distinctive aberrant features. To be sure, the association of such deviance with criminal, illicit, and illegal activity would not be acceptable in the twenty-first century because of its presumption that possession of such traits leads one to a life of crime. Nevertheless, these associations (physical, behavioral, and psychological characteristics) were the norm during the hey-day of *Dick Tracy*, namely, 1931–1950. In fact, this two-decade time span constitutes the database for this note (Galewitz, 1970; O'Connell, 2007; Roberts, 1993; *The Complete Chester Gould's Dick Tracy*, 2006, 2007a,b, 2008a,b,c).

Villainous names

On a few occasions, the names of some villains undergo minor orthographic changes before one spelling becomes definitive. Two such examples are "Cut" Famon / "Cut" Famoni (1935) and "Lips" Manlis / "Lips" Manlius. In each case, it is the first name of the pair that continues throughout the entire story sequence.

The members of organized crime have names that are stereotypically Italian ("Ribs" Mocco, 1931; Alphonse "Big Boy" Caprice, 1931; Dan "The Squealer" Mucelli, 1932), despite the fact that members of other ethnic groups were involved in organized crime. Typical of the mobsters of this era, these villains have characteristic nicknames, or monikers, which depict some aspect of their behavior or physiognomy. Big Boy's moll is Texie García. The character is likely modeled on Vaudevillian, film actor, and nightclub hostess Texas Guinan (1884–1933).

From the domain of authentic gangsters, there is "Maw" Famon (1935), who appears as the gun-wielding leader, and her "boys" who constitute a ring of criminals who represent the real-life Barker-Karpis gang. In another story, featuring the fictional Boris Arson, based to some extent on John Dillinger, this criminal uses a potato fashioned into the shape of a gun and dyed black to engineer his escape from prison, which is based on Dillinger's own clever escape on March 3 1934.

With the evolution of the strip, Gould developed his own unique criminals and gave them names, as noted previously, that represented various physical, behavioral,

and psychological anomalies. Implicit in these names was the notion that such deviations were, in part, the cause of the criminal's anti-social behavior.

One strategy frequently employed by Chester Gould is the reversal of the order of the letters of a criminal's name to provide a clue about their anatomy, personality, motivation, or driving force. The following are examples of this technique, which was popular with Gould for a four-year period: Frank Redrum (= "murder"), also known as "The Blank" (1937) because of his lack of facial features; Edward Nuremoh (= "homerun," 1939), a former baseball player; Prof. M. Emirc (= "crime," 1939); John Lavir (= "rival," 1939); Frank Rellik (= "killer," 1939); Kress Kroywen (= "New York," 1940); Junky Doolb (= "blood," 1940), Jerome Trohs (= "short," 1940), a diminutive man; Johnny Naem (= "mean," 1940); and Charlie Yenom (= "money," 1941).

Female villains appear periodically in *Dick Tracy*. These include: Texie García (1931), moll of Big Boy (1931), Belle (French for beautiful, 1932), Zora Arson (1935), sister of Boris Arson (1935), Mamma (1940), a gargantuan woman whose criminal accomplice is the diminutive Jerome Trohs (= "short," 1940), Mrs. Pruneface (1943), wife of villain Pruneface (1942), Breathless Mahoney (1945), stepdaughter of the criminal Shaky Trembly (1944).

Other significant and memorable villains in *Dick Tracy* include the following. Those with noteworthy physical differences are: Scardol (1939) with significant facial scars; Deafy (1940) with a hearing impairment; Little Face Finny (1941) with a tiny face; B. B. Eyes (1942) with tiny eyes; Pruneface (1942), with wrinkled facial skin; Flattop (1943–1944), with a flat head; The Brow (1944) with an enormous forehead; Measels (1945) with facial scars from the disease; Shoulders (1946) with huge shoulders; Mumbles (1947) with inarticulate speech; Heels Beals Shoes (1948) with elevator shoes to increase his diminutive stature; Pearshape Tone (1949) whose body shape was similar to that fruit; and Wormy Marrons (1950) whose distorted facial features mimicked "worms."

Other criminals with distinctive behavioral problems include the following: Mole (1941) who lived in a subterranean habitat; Laffy Smith (1943) who laughed uncontrollably; Itchell "Itchy" Oliver (1945) who scratched himself frequently; Gargles (1946) who gargled incessantly; and Coffeehead (1947) who drank coffee habitually and whose head resembled a coffeepot.

Finally, criminals with psychological issues are the following: Influence (1946) who used hypnosis to achieve his criminal ends; and Blowtop (1950) who had a bad temper. As is the case with most of the villains in Chester Gould's strip, these rogues all displayed a physical, behavioral, or psychological flaw that presumably led them into a life of crime. Their names, or their nicknames, always indicate the type of deviance that characterizes them. Yet another villain, Big Frost (1948), was modeled on Joseph Medill Patterson (1879–1946), publisher of *The Chicago Tribune*.

The lawyers who represent criminals in *Dick Tracy* are usually viewed with scorn and are considered shady individuals who employ legal technicalities to free their corrupt and depraved clients. Their names, in some cases, are actual legal terms, or popular orthographic versions of the real term, e.g., Mr. Habeas [*habeas corpus*], 1931, and Danny Supeena [*subpoena*], 1937, described as a "shyster lawyer." Other lawyers have pretentious names such as J. Peter Twillbrain, 1933, while one,

Spaldoni, the alias of the criminal George Bumpstead, 1934, engages in illegal activity to the shame of his entire family.

Minorities

The depiction of minorities is symbolized in the names in *Dick Tracy*. It must noted, however, that African-Americans are almost always anonymous, with one exception "Memphis" (1936). The use of this name is perhaps meant to signify that this individual formed part of the "Great Migration" (1910–1940) from the south to the Midwest, North, and West in search of work (Lemann, 1991). Their collective lack of a name signifies their total social marginalization. Members of this group are further depicted by their speech (non-standard English) and by their exaggerated physical characteristics — a commonplace in the comic strips of the 1930s. The villainess Texie García (1931), on the other hand, is depicted through her appearance, clothing and her name, i.e., "Texie," a person, no doubt, from Texas, and the clearly identifiable surname García suggest that she is a *Chicana*. Another Hispanic character is Pedro Paprika González (1945). In another episode, some Native Americans, identified as Pawnee Indians, a tribe ultimately located in "Indian Territory" (Oklahoma) in 1875, the state where Chester Gould was born, and he certainly would have had some contact with them. Chief Yellow Pony (1935) likewise uses non-standard English and wears clothing that is stereotypic of Native American garb. Finally, several Asian villains appear in the strip in the 1930s, including Toyee (1935), Maylie (1935), Lee Ting (1938), and Tau Ming (1938). Mayor Chiang (1938), a political leader of "Chinatown," has the highly recognizable name of the anti-communist Chinese leader Chiang Kai-shek (1887–1975), which served to identify him as Chinese. In the 1930s, in many adventure strips that took place in amorphous Asian locales, and contained Asian villains with highly distorted features and various markers of "otherness" (names, clothing, speech, different customs; Nuessel, 1984).

The film *Dick Tracy* (1990)

The 1990 Disney film *Dick Tracy* film by Disney was nominated for seven academy awards and it ultimately garnered three Oscars (Best Art Direction-Set Direction [Richard Sylbert and Rick Simpson], Best Makeup (John Cagilone Jr. and Doug Drexler], Best Song [Written by Stephen Sondheim, "Sooner or Later (I Always Get My Man)," sung by Madonna]). The villains and the actors who portrayed them together with the year of their original appearance in the strip are: Alphonse "Big Boy" Caprice (Al Pacino, 1931), "Lips" Manlis (Paul Sorvino, 1935), Flattop (William Forsythe, 1943–1944), Itchy (Ed O'Ross, 1945), Mumbles (Dustin Hoffman, 1947), 88 Keys (Mandy Patinkin, 1943), Pruneface (R. G. Armstrong, 1942), The Blank (Madonna, 1937), and Breathless Mahoney (Madonna, 1945). The main protagonists and the actors portraying them are: Dick Tracy (Warren Beatty, 1931), Tess Trueheart (Glenne Headly, 1931), and "The Kid" (= Junior Tracy, Charlie Korsmo, 1932).

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