

Questioning Comics

Women and Autocritique in Seth's *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken*

Seth's "picture-novella" *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken* is firmly situated in the conventionally male comics tradition, with a narrative that revolves around the physical and psychological journey of the male protagonist. Although it poses as an autobiography (the protagonist, also an artist, shares the creator's name), *It's a Good Life* is largely fictional; that said, Seth clearly blurs the boundary between his real and fictional self in order to pay tribute to comics creators he admires, and to comment on the body of work that informs his own place in the comics tradition. In this sense, *It's a Good Life* is a kind of *Künstlerroman* in that it traces the artist's development through his search for meaning in both life and art. The protagonist's selfish obsession with comics art, his nostalgia for the past, and his quest for the fictional male artist Kalo define a myopic and masculine world in which romantic relationships, love, and ethical obligations are cast aside for narcissistic pursuits. The book does, in fact, appear to contain several of the issues for which mainstream comics have often been criticized, particularly the portrayal of women as narrative embellishments or as eroticized objects of desire.¹ In *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art*, Roger Sabin discusses the matter of sexism in comics, particularly in adventure comics:

there were three main objections to . . . images [depicting women] put forward: that women performed subordinate roles, typically as "helpers" (nurses, mums, housewives); that they were used as plot devices, commonly as victims (there to be rescued, and the subject for violence); and that they were portrayed as sex objects. (79)

While Seth's storyline is far from that of an adventure comic, it references the genre and portrays a constellation of female characters who each appear to fit, almost perfectly, into one of the above categories. Similarly, the novella's nostalgically portrayed focus on the search for meaning and love nods to the romance and love comics of the forties and fifties which, like adventure comics, have been criticized for their depiction of limiting female roles: "[n]o matter how the various love comics differed, they all had one thing in common: in the end, true happiness came to every woman only with the love of the right man, and the traditional role of wife and homemaker" (Robbins 62).² However, the female characters in *It's a Good Life* also challenge these roles in a way that recalls attempts in comics history, particularly the feminist movement starting in the sixties, to engage with political and social issues; independent female comics artists—including Lee Marrs, Trina Robbins, and Willy Mendes—reacted "to the exclusion of women by . . . male cartoonists, and also to . . . sexism in comix" by producing their own comics works and eventually by collaborating to produce publications such as *It Ain't Me, Babe*, "the first all-woman comic book" (Robbins and Yronwode 79). These instances of resistance, then, suggest that *It's a Good Life* is not only acutely conscious of the history of female representation in mainstream and alternative comics, but also foregrounds the unique potential of sequential art to reformulate negative ideologies.

As Trina Robbins has discussed in her extensive work on women and the comics tradition, the force that emerged to act against misogyny—embodied in isolated creations of strong female heroes in the forties and fifties such as Katy Keene and Annie Oakley or in established feminist publications such as "that feminist warhorse *Wimmins Comix*" in the seventies and eighties—is equally powerful (114). Even the typically masculine world of adventure comics was infiltrated by characters such as Wonder Woman and Supergirl, who (while presenting a fresh set of concerns regarding female representation) introduced a powerful female force that fought back against crime, violence, and misogyny. As Lillian S. Robinson asserts in *Wonder Woman: Feminisms and Superheroes*, "the female superhero originates in an act of criticism—a challenge to the masculinist world of superhero adventures" (7). Modern graphic narratives are indeed transgressing boundaries and labels that had formerly consigned them to gendered, cultish readerships and given them the status of "low art," and are moving towards being acknowledged as a literature with the capability to engage with political and social issues in a far-reaching way. In recent decades the medium has become a vehicle for successfully exploring socially "uncomfortable" issues, and "authors like

Spiegelman and Sacco [have been able to] portray torture and massacre in a complex formal mode that does not turn away from or mitigate trauma; in fact, they demonstrate how its visual retracing is enabling, ethical, and productive” (Chute 459). As part of Seth’s endeavour to pay homage to the comics tradition, his female characters challenge ethical problems in the history of comics by evoking the counter-traditions that emerged in response to these issues: the result is a critical depiction of comics history that is fraught with rebellious attempts to oppose its misogynistic and myopic tendencies.

The self-reflexivity of *It’s a Good Life* further problematizes a straightforward reading of the book as inherently sexist or narrow-minded. Seth’s constant acknowledgment of his artistic forebears highlights his own position in the lineage of male comics creators, but also suggests an awareness of the conventions found in comics, which simultaneously differentiates the book from the tradition as well as consolidates its position within it. While Seth draws a range of commercial and alternative comics into his critique, many of which he explicitly names in the narrative and includes in a glossary in the endpapers, mainstream comics receive the most attention. Indeed, the fictional Seth is a kind of comics creation: a character whose actions and ideologies are influenced and formed by various—mostly mainstream—canonical comics’ plots, characters, and philosophies. It is Seth’s unique position as a “product” of mainstream comics which suggests that his shortcomings as a character be read as representative of shortcomings in this tradition; Seth is, effectively, a synecdoche for the history of mainstream comics and its various genres and representations. In the course of praising canonical comics creators, Seth (the creator) conducts an autocritique of the form, mainly through female characters, in order to subtly address significant problems in the comics tradition and draw attention to responding cultural movements that rallied for increased awareness of social and political issues. Women in *It’s a Good Life* implicitly and explicitly comment on (the fictional) Seth’s self-absorption and narcissism and encourage him to find meaning beyond comics, while also pointing to issues of communication and representation in the medium. This autocritique, therefore, not only highlights the immediate character’s limitations and his potential to move beyond them, but also motions towards the need for modern comics to address important ideological concerns, and for readers to think critically about comics and their broader implications.

The opening panel sequence establishes Seth’s obsession with comics and his sense of isolation. The instigating narrative is an illustration without text,

which highlights Seth's solitude and introduces the many-faceted issue of communication; while the image does create a mood of bleak isolation—mainly through the depiction of downward-looking individuals who walk through snow past uninviting storefronts—it does suggest the possibility of communication as Seth walks *towards* others. The prospect of human interaction is visually heightened by the illustration in the lower right panel, where Seth and a female character appear face-to-face, but is undermined by the accompanying text, which is revealed to be monologue rather than dialogue. Seth reveals that “[c]artoons have always been a big part of [his] life,” and he confesses on the following page that he thinks “too much” about them (1.2-2.2). Here, as in much of *It's a Good Life*, the panels work in a combination of moment-to-moment and aspect-to-aspect transitions, which conveys the slow narrative movement and creates a sense of Seth's contemplation, isolation, and his reluctance to progress; as Scott McCloud notes in *Understanding Comics*, “time seems to stand still in these quiet, contemplative combinations” (79). Although not explicit, the counterpoint that arises between text and image implies that Seth's isolation is a consequence of his monomaniacal obsession with comics; indeed, the lower right panel visually creates an immediate tension between men and women, and proleptically indicates Seth's inability to communicate effectively or maintain romantic relationships. Instead of noticing people, Seth's attention is focused on the bookstore, which he enters to browse the comics section while the text boxes reveal his constant train of thoughts about comics. The second panel on this page reveals a portion of the store's signage reading “Book Brothe,” which encourages a misreading of the text as “Book Brothel,” implicating the reader and making a submerged comment on Seth's excessively intimate relationship with comics; additionally, the correct title of the store, revealed in the following panel to be “Book Brothers,” boldly points to the homosocial network of comic collecting. Although focused specifically on picturebooks, Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott's study *How Picturebooks Work* offers an innovative approach to the interaction between verbal text and pictures that is often applicable to comics. Nikolajeva and Scott identify this incorporation of narrative into illustrations as *intraiconic text*, and argue that “the words' migration into the visual pictorial setting refines the experience of the environment, reflecting characteristics of the modern world, . . . the constant intrusion of advertising into our sense, and the clutter and distraction of our experiential relationship with the world around us” (74-75). The “Book Brothel/Brothers” sign, then, suggests the book's self-conscious

awareness of its own communication with, and influence on, the reader, and comments on its position in the fetishistic, masculine “collector” tradition of comics. Seth, as a symbol of mainstream comics history, is presented as an example of the comic collecting tradition’s insularity. Even when purchasing a comic book, Seth can only reply to the cashier’s attempted conversation with awkward laughter, and he explicitly admits his mania for comics and his inability to communicate in the accompanying text box: “I can’t do much of anything without—I mean, I can hardly say hello to someone without dragging Dr. Seuss, old Bemelmans or the inimitable Mr. Schulz into it” (3.2). By examining how Seth represents a tradition of “gag-cartoons, newspaper strips, [and] comic books,” Seth’s failure to communicate and his treatment of other characters can be read as indicative of certain mainstream comics’ reluctance and/or failure, historically, to speak ethically about broader political and social issues; conversely, the characters Seth encounters question his outlook in a way that recalls the response of many alternative comics to mainstream publications (1.3). While the opening sequence introduces Seth’s obsession, the narrative goes on to reveal that Seth’s fixation with comics not only consumes his thoughts, but defines his philosophies: Seth is created by the comics he admires.

Seth admits that his everyday actions consistently recall events, scenes, and characters in comics—“no matter what I talk about, it inevitably seems to lead back to cartooning”—yet the extent to which *It’s a Good Life* bombards the reader with comics intertexts that define Seth is perhaps surprising (31.4). Seth confesses that his “attitude towards life has mostly been shaped by ‘Peanuts,’” and particularly by Linus’ philosophy that “‘No problem is so big or so complicated that it can’t be run away from’” (95.4, 6). Seth’s inclination to avoid taking risks—especially of an emotional kind—fuels his nostalgic tendency to retreat physically and emotionally into the past; his fondness for the dinosaur room at the museum, which exhibits skeletons that echo Seth’s stasis and emotional futility, and his mother’s apartment, which is likewise “sealed in amber,” both exemplify Seth’s escapism (11.1). His aforementioned meditation on Dr. Seuss, Bemelmans, and Mr. Schulz, all of whom are most commonly associated with children’s literature, also appears as a symptom of Seth’s reluctance to mature. Similarly, Seth associates his childhood and his parents with “a holy trinity of cartoon characters, . . . ‘Nancy,’ ‘Andy Capp’ and ‘Little Nipper,’” while Seth’s extraordinarily loyal friend Chet (an homage to real-life cartoonist Chester Brown) functions largely as a soundboard for Seth’s nostalgic memories and his discoveries

about comics (42.6). Commonly, the illustrations depict events that trigger Seth's recollection of certain comics, while an accompanying explicit reference to the intertext is made in the text-box narrative that appears at the top of the panels; the skating scene at the beginning of Part Two, which causes Seth to think of Jimmy Hatlo's gags about "expectation and disappointment," is one such example (31.5). However, there are instances not made explicit in the book that build on the idea of Seth as an embodiment of comics. These intertextual moments are largely submerged in the narrative, but in hailing Seth as a comics creation they also implicate the reader who recognizes them as such. Take, for example, Seth's recollection of Tintin as he rides the train to Strathroy in his search for Kalo. Although the black text-boxes reference the hypotext, Hergé's *The Black Island*, and the specific scene containing Tintin on the train, the illustrations also provide a visual connection between *It's a Good Life* and *The Black Island*. The image of the train passing through the tunnel in *It's a Good Life* (77.3) is an obvious reference to the illustrated scene in *Tintin* (31.6), which it echoes in terms of content and visual composition. This intervisual connection emphasizes Seth's own connection to, and dependence on, comics history, as well as his nostalgia for the past and his extreme self-involvement; it is, perhaps, no coincidence that the gender economy in *The Black Island* is unbalanced and that the book has a homosocial plot featuring a very limited number of women. Similarly, when Seth is addressed as "Clark Kent" and "Superman" by two youths (94), the reader is required to *visually* connect Seth and the DC comics hero: Seth's attire—his suit, black-rimmed glasses, and fedora—faithfully replicates Clark Kent's wardrobe. Indeed, even Seth's romantic and sexual experiences are shaped by comics: "Hatlo's little girl character . . . was the first image that stirred sexual feelings in me," Seth admits (32.4). While Seth attempts to defend his early intimate experience with this character by explaining that he was "probably 6 years old at the time," his adult view of love remains, in many ways, rooted in the typical ideological representation of women in many mainstream comics (32.5).

In Part One of the book, Seth complains to Chet about his failure to maintain relationships with women, and declares that he does not "understand love" (14.2). Chet's reply, with which Seth enthusiastically agrees, reduces love to two fundamental components: "Love. It has always seemed to me that love is a combination of lust and pity" (14.2). This definition suggests that women, for Seth, must be either sexually desirable objects or victims in order for him to love them, classifications defined by Sabin as two of the central

problems with the depiction of women in adventure comics. The representation of women as either victims or objects of desire can be found in countless comics, several of which (including *Superman* and Bill Ward's cartoons) are referenced in the book; Seth, the author, both utilizes and critiques this tradition of female representation through the characters of Ruthie and Annie. These two characters embody the categories outlined by Chet: while Ruthie is presented as an object of Seth's desire, Annie is portrayed as a pitiable figure. However, both female characters comment, either implicitly or explicitly, on Seth's self-absorption and his failure to establish meaningful relationships; in doing so, Annie and Ruthie achieve significant positions in the narrative.

Ruthie is introduced as an object of Seth's gaze, which indicates, since Ruthie is silent here, that Seth's attraction to her is predominately physical (24-25). However, Seth first sees Ruthie in the library and in each of the six panels in which she first appears she clutches a book, suggesting that, while Ruthie's physicality in the novella is undeniably accentuated, Seth is also attracted by her bookishness. Although this observation does complicate a reading of Seth's attraction to Ruthie as merely physical, the panel layout of page 25 forces the reader to share Seth's visual perspective as voyeur and suggests his objectification of Ruthie; similarly, their second meeting in the park consists of Seth watching Ruthie for a series of panels before initiating any conversation. A significant amount of closure is required between the last panel in this sequence and the following page, which displays the only visually erotic scene in the novella; interestingly, even in this sexually suggestive illustration, the eroticism is countered by Ruthie's reading, contextually echoing the aforementioned initial meeting scene in which Ruthie carries a book (48-49). Indeed, despite the eroticized pictorial portrayal of Ruthie in these panels, the sequence creates a counterpoint between image and text that problematizes this visual insinuation: Ruthie's intelligent conversation, which leads to her discovery of Kalo's real name, elevates her authority, astuteness, and value in the comic beyond that of an aesthetic embellishment, and dispels the notion of her being merely a sexual icon. By uncovering Kalo's actual name and origin, Ruthie makes the first biographical discovery in the book, foreshadowing the narrative's resolution and linking her to Seth's developing interest in real human lives. These early panels, nonetheless, remain illustrative of Seth's self-absorption and extreme focus on comics, which he cannot set aside even during the most intimate of encounters. His inability to answer Chet's question, "So what's [Ruthie] like?" demonstrates the extent of his egotism and his lack of interest in

others: “She’s a student . . . French major . . . I guess I don’t know her too well myself yet” (51.5, .6). In the same way that she probes beyond illustrations to discover the “real” Kalo, Ruthie forces Seth and the reader to consider issues beyond the immediate narrative by highlighting and directly questioning Seth’s self-interested existence and his desire for stagnation.

Seth’s visit to the museum initiates his conversation with Ruthie about progress and change, in which the only example of change that Seth admits to liking is his mother’s newfound appreciation for make-up. Ruthie’s reply to Seth’s answer is scolding: “That’s it? *That’s* the best example of positive change you can come up with? You really do think small! What about civil rights or the women’s movement . . . or medical progress? Boy oh boy!” (63.6-7). Ruthie’s comment not only highlights Seth’s narcissism, but also reflexively suggests the representation of social issues in comics: *It’s a Good Life* suggests that Seth (the creator) creates a conflict between Seth and Ruthie that is representative of the conflict between certain insular, patriarchal, male-created comics—particularly the romance and superhero comics of the fifties through to the seventies³—and the underground movement that surfaced to counter the lack of social awareness in these publications. Emerging in the sixties, the women’s liberation movement “paralleled that of the new underground comics movement,” and resulted in publications that not only spoke out for women’s rights, but also “challenged American middle-class values” (Robbins 83).⁴ Conversely, as J. Robyn Goodman points out in her examination of *Life* magazine cartoons depicting the women’s suffrage movement at the turn of the twentieth century, cartoons have also played a role “in reinforcing political, cultural, social, and gender ideologies,” and have “supported antisuffrage ideologies and helped produce negative public opinion towards . . . suffragism” (46). Ruthie, therefore, questions the comics tradition through Seth, and points to the powerful potential of the comics medium to propel or alter ideologies.

The formal aspects of the page also work to convey Ruthie’s independence and strength as a character. Although Seth walks beside Ruthie in the top two panels, he disappears from the central panels where Ruthie moves to the foreground of the picture planes. The physical divide that occurs between the two characters mirrors their divided ideas about value and progress; as Seth (the creator) notes, “when used well the drawings act as symbols to direct the eyes and the emotions” (“An Interview With Seth”). Furthermore, Ruthie’s visual location in these panels and her centrality in the overall page composition give her a prioritized position on the page that stresses her autonomy and the import of her speech. Seth’s clear discomfort with Ruthie’s

reasoning, shown visually by his distressed expression, suggests his reluctance to acknowledge the positive and broader benefits of change. Seth falls back onto his philosophy of “avoidism” and draws the conversation away from social and political progress and back to a first-person account of his own fears and anxieties: “I’d be more than happy if the world would just stay relatively like this until I die” (64.6). Ruthie responds to Seth’s evasion of the issues she raises by pointing out his inability to listen. In one panel, Seth and Ruthie walk past a graffitied heart on a wall with the name “Fran” underneath (64). This icon reminds Ruthie of Fran Lebowitz’s quotation, “the opposite of talking isn’t listening, it’s waiting,” which appears, in this context, as a direct comment on Seth’s incapacity to listen (65.1). The fact that Fran Lebowitz is an icon for a strong, successful, and independent female artist, builds on Ruthie’s earlier commentary about social change and women’s rights. Seth, however, is repelled by Ruthie’s attempt to raise his awareness of these issues, and he retreats, physically and emotionally, into his search for Kalo; declining Ruthie’s offer to accompany him, Seth leaves Toronto to travel to Kalo’s hometown, Strathroy. His visit is immersed in nostalgia, and represents a complete shift away from the significant concerns he is forced to face during his time with Ruthie; however, while his search for Kalo is fruitless, Seth’s encounter with Annie at the motel forces him once again to face issues beyond his selfish preoccupation with comics.

Annie is introduced as a figure of pity and, as a somewhat pathetic and vulnerable character, fulfils the “requirement” for love, as defined by Chet, that is absent in Ruthie, but she lacks Ruthie’s erotic appeal. Annie’s characterization is established through the panel construction in this sequence, as well as through her dialogue with Seth. Her motel room is filled with religious paraphernalia, and one of the drawings she shows Seth is, as he points out, “sorta religious in nature” (106.7). While Seth does not explicitly reveal his thoughts about Annie and her situation, the visual rhyming that occurs in the sequence, linking it to other moments in the plot, indicates Seth’s opinions. A panel depicts a still-life arrangement of her belongings (106) that visually echoes an earlier panel in which Seth describes a similar collection of objects in a storefront window: “The whole thing—it’s kind of sweet and pathetic at the same time” (41). The abundance of religious iconography in the room implies that Annie is searching for some kind of meaning, which is confirmed when Seth asks the question, “So Annie, what brings you here to Strathroy?” to which she poignantly answers, “love” (106.5). Although Seth appears unaware of the connection, a clear parallel emerges between Annie

not only considering Kalo's life and work, but is also thinking about Annie (108.6). The two panels that appear at the top of the recto, before the second "black sky" panel, depict Seth presumably contemplating this question as he smokes a cigarette. This scene is a crucial turning point in the narrative, as it is the first time Seth evidently considers the value of human lives and begins to realize the relative insignificance of "some yellowing, brittle cartoons" (109.1). Although Seth does not attempt to speak directly to Annie, the note he leaves on her door—"Goodbye Annie; Take care of yourself. Seth"—is a form of communication (albeit mediated) that suggests a certain sympathy and increased altruism. Indeed, in Part Five, Seth begins to fully recognize his own flaws and assess his previous actions.

Seth considers his treatment of women and admits to Chet that, while he previously "couldn't . . . recognize the pattern in all those relationships," he now recognizes himself as "the common element in those failures" (122.2). Seth admits to treating Ruthie "very poorly," and points out that she was correct in telling him that he would regret ending the relationship (123.2-4). Although Seth is still defensive about his actions and ends his discussion with Chet by declaring it "a profoundly futile and stupid conversation," these confessions show a marked progression in Seth's awareness of others' feelings, and indicate his movement towards finding meaning outside of comics (123). This idea is further enforced by Seth's recollection of ending his relationship with Ruthie (126). A panel portraying Seth sitting alone with his cat follows the sequence that depicts the break-up. This panel, like those in the "motel room" sequence, suggests that Seth is contemplating his actions and feels a sense of regret or remorse. The final panel in the recto is particularly poignant. Although open to interpretation, it suggests Seth's unsuccessful attempt to contact Ruthie: the open telephone directory and telephone emblemize the possibility of communication, but the immobility of the scene—the fact that Seth does not pick up the receiver—implies his failure to call her (127.7). The added detail of the nearby roll of tissue paper is an affecting indication of Seth's emotional response to this disappointment. While both Ruthie and Annie highlight Seth's ideological expectations about women and force him to confront realities he finds uncomfortable, Seth still continues his search for Kalo; however, this search leads to the acquisition of knowledge not about Kalo's art, but rather about Kalo himself and the relationships he had while alive. Significantly, the narrative progression of *It's a Good Life* corresponds with Seth's own discovery of the importance of relationships, and his search for Kalo results in Seth forming, and attempting to recover,

relationships with women. Kalo's daughter, Susan, is the third female in the story who influences Seth's actions and philosophies, and through whom the author critiques Seth's search.

Susan shatters Seth's hopes about finding information on Kalo's work when she admits her lack of knowledge about her father's cartooning. Although the initial panels in the sequence reveal Seth's disappointment, his interest in Kalo's cartoons becomes replaced by an interest in Kalo's life: "Why don't you tell me what sort of person he was. . . . If it's not being too personal—could I ask you the same question about your mother? What she was like? How they met?" (146.4, .6). An exchange occurs between the two characters in which Susan imparts her knowledge of Kalo's life and Seth shows Susan the Kalo cartoons he has collected. This trade of information creates an implicit bond between Seth and Susan, and the different understanding that they both gain about Kalo through their interaction displays to each of them another dimension of his life; as Susan realizes, "It's not a part of the man I knew" (150.8). The significance of this exchange is also conveyed pictorially. In this panel, Seth looks at the images in the scrapbook while Susan looks at her father's cartoons; the absence of text here emphasizes that the communication that takes place is through the act of reading as opposed to speaking, and comments reflexively on *our* reading of the panel, and of comics generally. Seth's facial expression invites us to read his experience as pleasurable, although he does not receive the information he desired. Furthermore, the panels on these pages—which switch between images of Seth and Susan, Kalo's cartoons, and pictures of Kalo—dissolve the boundaries between art and life, and suggest an important movement away from the dialectic that formally existed in the narrative. Seth, therefore, not only learns about Kalo, but also that it is possible for art and life to coexist; in light of this recognition, Susan's comment, "I haven't been much help to you," appears extremely ironic (151.7).

In breaking down the boundaries between comics and human interaction, *It's a Good Life* also comments on comics' potential influence on society and ideology. Seth's conversation with Susan directs him to Kalo's best friend Ken, who, like Susan, knows nothing about Kalo's cartoons, but tells Seth about Kalo as an individual. Ken's comments about Kalo's attitude towards cartooning are telling, and he reveals to Seth that even though Kalo was an active participant in the comics industry, he conducted his own critique of the medium: "we didn't talk too much about cartoons . . . but when they did come up [Kalo] was always critical" (153.6). Kalo's criticism of cartooning is perhaps the most explicit example of autocritique in the book. Although

Kalo's critique, as recalled by Ken, seems to be either technical (about "the drawing . . . getting worse") or conservative (about "the humour . . . getting cruder") rather than directly addressing issues in the *content* of comic art, they nonetheless add another layer of critical assessment to the narrative (154.1). His conversation with Ken, as with Susan, moves Seth towards an understanding of the value of human relationships, and his discovery of the parallel between life and comics art in the immediate narrative draws attention to the overall impact of comics as social and political tools; as Matthew McAllister, Edward Sewell, and Ian Gordon point out, comics have a unique ability to "challenge and/or perpetuate power differences in society" ("Introducing Comics and Ideology" 2). Seth, as a character who represents comics history, demonstrates a movement away from ideologies established at the beginning of the novella, particularly power differences between men and women, and towards a more altruistic existence in which human relationships take priority. Indeed, after his interaction with Susan and Ken, Seth attempts to regain contact with Annie. *It's a Good Life*, then, seems to valorize an ideology that collapses the disparity between life and comics, and promotes an awareness of the ethical treatment of the individual that challenges cases of sexism, selfishness, and disrespect as they arise.

Annie becomes one of the most influential characters in the novella in terms of this ideological shift. As an artist, Annie unknowingly competes with Kalo for Seth's respect and interest, and, although her initial attempt to share her art and friendship with Seth is rejected, her impact on Seth is quite profound; however, the extent of her influence on his development extends throughout the book. Before Seth goes to Strathroy for the second time, his brother's question, "Hey, you gonna stay at the same motel where you met that crazy girl?" implies that Seth has since talked, and therefore thought, about Annie (133.6). Similarly, his desire to contact her after speaking to Kalo's daughter and friend suggests that their conversation about Kalo somehow reminds Seth of Annie, and encourages him to regain her friendship. The panel in which Seth tries to call Annie echoes the illustration of the telephone directory and telephone in the scene with Ruthie, but while the earlier panel points only to the possibility of communication with Ruthie, the later panel depicts a more active attempt to contact Annie: "Hi—I was, uh, wondering if you have a guest staying there named Annie. . . . no, I don't know the last name" (159.1; ellipsis in original). Ken's answer to Seth's question about whether or not it mattered to Kalo that he stopped cartooning is significant here: "When you get to my age you discover that *everything*

mattered” (155.5; emphasis added). This comment not only encourages Seth to consider his own system of values—what “matters” to him—but it also gestures to the process of reading the book, the significance of individual aspects of the comic that work to convey the overall meaning of the narrative. Seth’s effort to contact Annie shortly after this scene implies, therefore, that her position in the narrative, and her relation to him, “matters” significantly.

Annie’s importance is also foreshadowed at the beginning of the book, even before the narrative begins: the drawing that appears on the title page of the book resembles, in a more realistic style, the drawing that Annie presents to Seth in the motel. Because this illustration is situated outside the narrative, Annie’s drawing takes on significance beyond the immediate story; as Nikolajeva and Scott explain, the “title page picture may . . . suggest and amplify a certain interpretation” (250). The choice to use this drawing, rather than a Kalo cartoon, as the title-page illustration is especially interesting because it implies that Annie’s drawing has a value in the narrative that is equal to, if not greater than, Kalo’s work; “[t]he arrangement of cover to endpapers to title page, etc.” the creator acknowledges, “is such a marvelous set of elements to play with” (Seth, “An Interview With Seth”). Despite her saying “it’s only apple blossoms,” Annie’s drawing becomes symbolic of a meaning that surpasses content and points to the value of human relationships; it suggests a *connection* between art and human relations rather than the division presented at the beginning of the story (106.2). The endpapers in the book convey a similar idea: the cartoon drawings of images from Susan’s scrapbook represent an explicit correlation between cartooning and human relationships, and the creator’s dedication to his mother, in which he credits her as the inspiration for the book’s title, provides an early indication of the importance of women in the novella. The connection between art and human relationships is also stressed during the fictional Seth’s conversation with Kalo’s mother, Mrs. Kalloway.

Again, what information Seth learns about Kalo’s cartooning is limited, and Mrs. Kalloway’s replies, like the comments Ruthie makes, are not always what Seth wants to hear; Seth, arguably, wants to be told that Kalo is like him. Seth’s interest in Kalo’s work is largely based on the similarities Seth sees between himself and Kalo: not only are both men lesser-known cartoonists but, according to Chet, they also share the same drawing style (19.2). In fact, in many ways Kalo and Seth are parallel characters, even doubles: they share the same hometown, are both cartoonists, are both apparently fatherless, and both have four-letter names—indicating yet another level

of the construction of Seth as a representative of comics. Mrs. Kalloway's description of Kalo and her comments about his attitude to his cartooning are, therefore, hard for Seth to hear: unlike Seth, Kalo "was a happy man, content with a sort of life of quiet acceptance," and did not, contrary to Seth's assumptions, resent giving up cartooning (163.8). These final pages seem to answer the aforementioned question that Seth asks after meeting Annie—"After a whole life, is this what it boils down to? A few sheets of paper?"—and Seth draws the epiphanic conclusion that "*above all*, he was a good person" (164.2; emphasis added). By modifying this inference with "above all," Seth suggests that this is the most important thing he has learned about Kalo and, therefore, about himself; as with Susan, Seth gains this wisdom through an exchange whereby he shows Mrs. Kalloway her son's cartoons. Seth's question to Mrs. Kalloway regarding Kalo's death also seems to highlight the transience of life and the impossibility of avoiding real-life situations, despite Seth's earlier admission of being, like Linus, a "true adherent of avoidism" (95.7). Seth's recognition of Kalo's good character also points to his own progression towards becoming a more contented and accepting individual; the final three panels in the narrative suggest that even though Seth's expectations about Kalo are proved false and he does not discover any information about his work, he takes pleasure in "reconnecting" Mrs. Kalloway with her son through his art. Both characters are smiling, and Seth's silence points to a recognition of his contentment that does not need to be verbally expressed. Significantly, a woman speaks the final words in the narrative; Mrs. Kalloway's comment, "I didn't know he had it in him," can pertain not only to her son's art, but also to Seth's newly discovered ability to communicate and find a possible satisfaction in life (164.8). Seth, therefore, learns to accept that change is not necessarily negative. This realization motions, on the level of autocritique, towards a need for progression and change in comics. It suggests that while the past can be appreciated—as it is through the book's homage to canonical cartoon art, its glossary of influential comics, and its conventional and nostalgic format—it is necessary for some things to change; as Seth, the creator, explains, "[y]ou have to . . . be able to embrace what was positive in [mainstream comics], and try and get away from what was negative" (Seth, *The Comics Journal*).

While the narrative proper concludes at this point, the book contains a further section comprised of eleven "Kalo" cartoons that Seth has collected. The illustrations, however, include no narrative commentary about Seth's thoughts or opinions on the drawings, but rather leave the reader to deduce

an entirely interpretive meaning. After the narrative movement away from issues of power, sexism, and selfishness, the Kalo drawings contain surprising content: many of them indulge in overtly sexist jokes and deal primarily with power relations. In fact, it is not surprising that Chet discovers one of Seth's Kalo cartoons in a "girly magazine" that he had bought "for the Bill Ward drawings" (52.3, .6). Although Seth calls it a "cheesy magazine" and mocks Chet's admiration for Bill Ward—"BILL WARD! HA HA! The guy who draws the torpedo tits?"—the similarity between the Kalo and Ward cartoons, as revealed at the end, makes his comment appear somewhat self-critical (52.6-7). Trina Robbins points out how Bill Ward's drawings tend to objectify women, and she places his drawings (particularly his *Torchy* illustrations) in the trend of the "dumb blonde' . . . comic book theme that kept popping up during the 1940s and 1950s" (*Girls to Grrrlz* 15). While Kalo's style is noticeably more cartoony than Ward's, the crude jokes and depictions of buxom women being ogled by men are remarkably comparable, and even their signatures bear a striking resemblance.

Seth's critique of Ward's work, and the implicit connection between Kalo and Ward, therefore suggests that the final drawings should be viewed with a critical eye. This is not to say that Seth does not appreciate Ward's talent and drawing style—which he inadvertently admires through his fascination with Kalo's work, and which in reality is widely regarded—but rather that he points to the necessity of being critically aware of the social implications of *all* comics art. As the creator Seth points out, comics, as a part of the culture industry, require readers to look objectively and critically at what they convey: "What we hope is that at some point, as an individual, you can reject the values it's putting across to you, and analyze what they're showing you" (Seth, *The Comics Journal*). Indeed, this is what *It's a Good Life* requires of the reader in this final section. The novella effectively provides us with a set of critical tools with which to analyze the Kalo cartoons: the gender issues pointed to by Ruthie, in terms of the treatment of women; the implications of being understood and accepted as an artist and finding meaning in the process, as highlighted by Annie; the connection between life and art; and the power of art to either bridge or divide people and selves, as conveyed by Seth's relationships with women towards the end of the book. Seth, as creator, pays homage to the comics tradition while advocating the necessity of change; the autocritique in *It's a Good Life* inspires a progression away from negative ideologies and a movement towards critical awareness when both reading and creating comics.

NOTES

- 1 While sexism is most commonly associated with mainstream comics, the reluctance of the “male-dominated underground comics community” in the sixties to recognize or publish female comics artists, and the violently misogynistic works that were produced in reaction to such efforts by women, should not be overlooked (Robbins and Yronwode 79-80).
- 2 The body of work to which I refer was composed of comics aimed specifically at female readers and included titles such as *My Date*, *Young Romance*, *Young Brides*, *Young Love*, *In Love*, *My Romance*, *Cinderella Love*, *Romantic Secrets*, *Lover’s Lane*, *True Love*, and *Teen-Age Romance*. A comprehensive list and discussion of many more romance and love comics can be found in Chapter 2 of Trina Robbins’ *Girls to Grrrlz*.
- 3 Although mainstream romance comics of the sixties and seventies pushed the boundaries of gender roles, and “their heroines evolved from waitresses and housewives into college students, stewardesses and rock-stars,” the ultimate idea of female success was still marriage (Robbins 70). Similarly, while women were given agency and power in certain superhero comics, Wonder Woman and Supergirl being obvious examples, the genre most commonly featured male protagonists and indulged relentlessly in gender stereotyping. With some exceptions, these publications also largely ignored issues of (and often perpetuated) class inequality and racial intolerance.
- 4 Having said this, female comics creators struggled throughout the sixties to be admitted into what was an “almost exclusively male field,” and it was not until 1970 that feminism in underground comics really found a foothold (Robbins 85).

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