

4-1-2011

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### Recommended Citation

Mierzejewska, Zuzanna (2011) "Charlie Chaplin: The Genius Behind Comedy," *ESSAI*: Vol. 9, Article 28.  
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol9/iss1/28>

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## Charlie Chaplin: The Genius Behind Comedy

by Zuzanna Mierzejewska

(English 1102)

The quote, “A picture with a smile-and perhaps, a tear” (“*The Kid*”) is not just an introduction to Charlie Chaplin’s silent film, *The Kid*, but also a description of his life in a nutshell. Many may not know that despite Chaplin’s success in film and comedy, he had a very rough childhood that truly affected his adult life. Unfortunately, the audience only saw the man on the screen known world-wide as the Tramp, characterized by: his clown shoes, cane, top hat and a mustache. His humor was universal; it focused on the simplicity of our daily routines and the funniness within them. His comedy was well-appreciated during the silent film era and cheered soldiers up as they longed for peace and safety during World War I and other events in history. Through the years of hard work, Chaplin always perfected his humor, and instead of being agitated, “Actors ... always went along because they knew they were working with a master” (“Charlie Chaplin: About the Actor”). But regardless of being able to play many different roles, and often express nothing but happiness, Chaplin indeed had a sad life that the general viewer might not pick out from only watching his films. Hence, anyone interested in comedy should take the time to learn about the man who was, after all, a master of it.

Charlie Chaplin’s life wasn’t as simple as his humor. Superficial things like fame and money didn’t fix the pain and emotional stress that were caused to him as a little boy. Chaplin’s film *The Kid* exposes his true identity: his happiness and simplicity, his humor, beliefs, and most importantly, his pain. Thus, there’s a lot to say about this incredible comedian, yet I will only focus on things that I think really had an effect on him and shaped his persona. Firstly, Chaplin’s father’s lack of affection for him caused him to become a depressed, guilt-filled individual. His parents’ broken marriage had a negative effect on his own relationships and caused him lots of pain until he found the right woman at an old age. His film, *The Kid*, exposes Chaplin’s love for his son that he lacked himself in real life. On the contrary, Chaplin’s mother’s love and constant care and attention taught him to try to be the best father he could, no matter the financial situation. In the movie, it is seen as him being caring and attentive to his child’s needs. Also, Christianity played a positive role in Chaplin’s life when he used it to turn to God in times of despair and for the purpose of understanding his own situation. The film focuses on a few Christian concepts that tie into the Biblical messages Chaplin’s mother shared with him in his young years. Overall, Chaplin’s childhood had a great effect on him and made him the person that we know of today. *The Kid* is a great example of that.

In accordance with John McCabe, an author of the book *Charlie Chaplin*, Chaplin’s life began on April 16<sup>th</sup>, 1889 in Walworth, London. In the beginning, his father, Charles Chaplin Sr., supported the family financially, but his performing career declined when he started drinking heavily. He and his wife, Hannah Chaplin, separated soon after their son’s birth. As a result, Hannah Chaplin had to support herself, her son Charlie and his step-brother Sydney, on her own. Being a well-known singer, life was not too bad for them at first. Not long after though, Hannah Chaplin’s voice failed her. She could no longer sing and instead worked several different jobs, such as a nurse and a seamstress. Due to lack of regular payments for their house, her sewing machine was ultimately taken away. Regardless of the poverty the Chaplin family came to live in, Hannah Chaplin loved her sons and taught them religious values and funny impersonations that kept her sons’ spirits up (1-7). Once, when she was reading the New Testament to her son, “she... comment[ed] on Christ’s personality. As she reached...the words, ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ she wept

and Charlie wept with her. ‘Don’t you see,’ she said, ‘how human He was; like all of us. He too suffered doubt’” (McCabe 8). This very emotional incident was a great opportunity for a mom to show her beloved son that Jesus, too, was “human” and “suffered doubt”. Hannah Chaplin related Jesus’s many trials and moments of betrayal and unknowingness to the family’s own financial situation. Such a wonderful connection has had to provide the Chaplin family with some comfort and hope for a better and more secure future.

Unfortunately the better future didn’t come so soon. Since there was no money to support the family, Hannah Chaplin and the boys were eventually separated in 1896. Charlie and Sydney Chaplin were placed in an orphanage. It was a devastating experience for all of them. While staying in the orphanage, Charlie Chaplin looked forward to Christmas because that was the only day the children were given gifts: an orange and a box of chocolates. As McCabe mentioned, Chaplin planned to split his orange and chocolates and eat only a little bit each day so they would last him a few weeks. Sadly, he never got his gift because of forgetting to make his bed one night (10). But that was not the only time that poor little Chaplin was punished unreasonably. During his stay at that orphanage, he often plead guilty to things he wasn’t responsible for and thus was yelled at and beaten. Recalling those experiences, Chaplin later said, “I felt neither resentment nor injustice but a sense of frightening adventure. . . although paralyzed with pain and carried to the mattress to recover, I felt valiantly triumphant” (Kuriyama 27). Despite Chaplin specifically mentioning that he did not feel “injustice” when punished, this feeling of indifference could have been highly linked with not seeing his mother for so long and lacking a sense of purpose. Any other child probably wouldn’t take blame for things they didn’t do nor would they feel “triumphant”. It’s that deep connection to his mother that really pulled him through these punishments.

Finally, Hannah was able to take the boys back. When she was picking up her son Charlie from the orphanage, “The infirmary nurse asked Hannah to excuse the boy’s dirty face. Hannah laughed, hugged and kissed him, and her exact words Charlie remembered to his old age: ‘With all thy dirt, I love thee still’” (McCabe 11). Even though the systematic separations from his mother could have had a negative effect on Charlie Chaplin, he “remembered to his old age” how much she really loved him and wanted to provide for him and his brother. But, although Hannah Chaplin was with her sons physically once again, she often was not there mentally, as she worried about the future to the point that she became depressed and was certified insane. As she sought help, Charlie Chaplin’s father was able to get him a job with a clog dancing group called The Eight Lancashire Lads. It was a great opportunity and it really helped him grow as a performer. Charles Chaplin Sr. also took the boys in to live with him for a while when Hannah Chaplin could not be around. But that short period of time only made Chaplin realize how much he missed his father on an every-day basis. For instance, once, Chaplin Sr. was drinking at a bar when he spotted his son walking by and convinced him to perform in front of his friends. He proudly gave him money, but, “[he] had given him something else: a kiss and an embrace- the first and only time he did so. This was the last time Charlie saw his father” (McCabe 19). The fact that the author even mentions that Chaplin’s father gave his son “a kiss and an embrace” suggests that it was not a common thing for him to do. Unquestionably, Charlie Chaplin had a reason to always feel unloved and unsatisfied with relationships later in life, since his father could not adequately build on that foundation of love.

In 1901, Chaplin’s father died and so the boy quit working for The Eight Lancashire Lads. From there, he took on various jobs as his mother’s condition worsened. But Charlie Chaplin was not doing so well himself. He claims, “‘For months I went through agony, unable to breathe. At times I wanted to jump out the window’” (Kuriyama 27). The boy’s pain and suffering after his father’s death really shows how much of an influence, despite his drunkenness and irresponsibility, Charles Chaplin Sr. had on him. But as time passed, these terrible feelings left him for a while and he moved on, as it seemed. Young Chaplin decided it was time to occupy himself after grieving the loss of his father. He first took part in drama acts. His unique character surely helped him get ahead. As

mentioned by McCabe, through the play *Cinderella*, one agent saw Chaplin's talent and featured him in his act *From Rags to Riches*. This was his first appearance as an actor. Chaplin was really into the whole acting idea for a while. But after some months on tour, he came back to London and took on random jobs. Thankfully, Harry A. Sainbury, a known actor and playwright, helped spark his interest and decided to feature him in his plays. Chaplin's inability to read was surprisingly not a problem, since he easily memorized everything Sainbury dictated to him. Sainbury did not teach him to act and how to listen and feel into everything he was doing on stage; he only perfected those skills that were already innate to Chaplin (19-21). Chaplin got to perform in the following plays: *A Romance of Cockayne*, *Sherlock Holmes*, and two comedy sketches at the time: *Repairs* and *Casey's Court Circus*. *Although not all his performances were successful yet, Charlie Chaplin never gave up hope and was eager to try new things and environments. All the hard work was bound to pay off someday.*

But these somewhat small, insignificant roles and performances were ultimately what shaped the young performer. Looking back on his first appearances, Charlie Chaplin was able to find the type of work that he stuck with for the rest of his life. He recalls,

I had stumbled on the secret of being funny... I walk on the stage, serious, dignified, solemn, pause before and easy chair... and sit on the cat. Nothing funny about it really... But you laugh. You laugh because it is unexpected... In the two years I was with *The Casey Circus* I gradually gave up my idea of playing great parts on the dramatic stage. I grew to like the comedy work. (McCabe 25)

If not for trying out different environments as a teen, Chaplin might have never become such a great and well-known comedian. It is due to his parents' active encouragement to pursue drama and performing acts that Charlie Chaplin realized he "like[d] the comedy work". Truly, this was the point in his life that also helped Chaplin see himself as a comedian... and even establish his own style of comedy. As described above, Chaplin did not necessarily create an obnoxiously funny environment or persona, but drew upon the regular, typical, every-day events that he exaggerated, whether it was with unpredictability or his Tramp outfit.

Chaplin's roots definitely shaped him in London, but his career didn't really start until he came to America in September 1910. America is the place where Chaplin grew into a man, and all that influenced him in his childhood, became evident in his work as an actor and a director as well. It's important to note that Charlie Chaplin really is a one-of-a-kind comedian that stood out in this new country. His style was simple, yet incredibly appreciated during the historical time period. As Chaplin performed, important events occurred in world history, mainly World War I, the Great Depression and then World War II. People were losing all their hope, investments, and relatives... and surely need to be cheered up. This is where Charlie Chaplin jumped in. He brought laughter and confidence to soldiers overseas, and ultimately become known all over the world. His comedy was universal- from a child to elder and from culture to culture, everyone was able to comprehend the simple silliness of a man with a mustache, cane and clown shoes on a black and white screen. The fact that my own mother wrote about this fascinating comedian in school in Poland about twenty five years ago really speaks to me because there aren't many comedians who are so universally appreciated and talked about for years.

America is also the place where Chaplin showed his true colors as a movie star. His film *The Kid* was his first full-length film that came out in 1921. *The Kid* is a silent movie about Chaplin's first son; produced, directed, and written by him. The main actors include Carl Miller (the Man), Edna Purviance (the Woman), Jack Coogan (the Child), and Charlie Chaplin (the Tramp). The film starts with a woman leaving a hospital with her newborn baby. She walks to a park and looks sadly into the distance with the baby in her arms. While strolling, the woman sees an empty car and thus seizes an opportunity to leave the baby in it. She then walks away quickly into the distance. Two men steal the car, and almost shoot the baby when they see it as it cries, but decide to just dump it in the

alley instead. Charlie Chaplin, or the Tramp, finds the baby and after a few attempts of giving it away to other people and reading a note dug into the baby's blanket, saying "Please love and care for this orphan child" he decides to keep it. Meanwhile, the woman runs back to get her baby, but the car is already gone. On the other side of town, the Tramp raises the child, which he names John, in a small, inadequate apartment.

When John is five years old, he gets into a fight with another boy that takes away his toys. After the match, the woman, a famous star already, finds the injured boy and brings him back to the Tramp, not knowing that he is actually her son. The Tramp gets a doctor which after checking up on the boy, calls for County Orphan Asylum saying John needs proper care and attention. The boy is taken away, but the Tramp runs on the rooftops and jumps into the car where John is. He kicks out one of the men from the car and reunites with his child. The woman comes to visit the boy and the Tramp and the doctor tells her they've been kicked out and hands her the note which the Tramp found along with the baby, a few years ago. The woman then realizes that the child is her own son since she wrote the note when leaving the baby in the car. In the end, the mother and the boy are reunited, but in the last scene, the Tramp finds his way back to John and the film ends with him walking into the woman's house with John in his arms.

*The Kid* is a very moving film. It truly is, "A picture with a smile-and perhaps, a tear" that is almost like a dedication from Charlie to his viewers, used as a way to explain the person he was in real life. The movie focuses on themes such as family, childhood, gender roles, responsibility, love, cleverness, poverty, good and evil, Christianity and human imperfection. All those themes seem to have been embedded in his childhood and most of them are clearly showing up once again in the film. Therefore, I think *The Kid* portrays Chaplin's childhood well. Chaplin plays a poor, but such a loving, and positive man and role-model for John. He shared all he had with his son. I particularly love the scene when the doctor leaves and the Tramp sits next to sleeping John, picks up his wrist and checks his pulse. Then he looks into the distance with the saddest eyes, not knowing what will happen next. That scene symbolizes the everlasting love he had for the orphan child, the worry about his health-being and his own inability to provide well for him. His eyes seem full of guilt, which Chaplin has actually carried with him ever since his father left the family. Although one might almost miss the valid case for depression represented in *The Kid*, this is the scene that truly symbolizes it. On the other hand, Chaplin didn't seem to long for love in the movie like he did in real life. He seemed perfectly happy before he found the baby and actually decided to take care of it. But in reality, he truly longed for a companion, as seen by his four marriages in real life, and simply presented as his son in the movie. Later, when John is taken away, Chaplin goes crazy until he finally gets him back. He realizes that life on his own will not bring him happiness.

The fact that Chaplin's father failed as a role model for his son, doesn't mean that Chaplin turned out the same way. In the movie, he puts all that special emphasis on his son and how much he truly cares for him. But it's not a result of him overcoming his depression or forgiving his father, but rather because of how his mother raised him. The way Chaplin inspected Jack's cleanliness after playing outside and gave him the same amount of food he got in the film, were just snippets of how his own mother used to care for him. Hannah Chaplin, too, raised her sons in inadequate homes by herself and struggled to get by, but tried to be happy for her boys. Chaplin's childhood theme of Christianity is also seen in *The Kid*, as instilled in his childhood by his mother as well. In the beginning of the movie, when the woman leaves the hospital with her baby, there is a picture of Jesus Christ walking with a cross. This is probably a reference to the child being too much for the woman to handle. In relation to Chaplin, it could represent the guilt he carried over the years that his father caused him. Then later, the woman breaks up the fight between the Tramp and another man and tells them, "Remember- if he smites you on one cheek, offer him the other," which is actually a reference to Luke 6:29 in the Bible. This quote is important as it signifies the type of character Chaplin had. As mentioned before, when he was at an orphanage as a little boy, he took on punishments for the things

he didn't do. Similarly here, the woman reminds the men to do the same exact thing. Lastly, the Tramp had a dream in the movie about angels in the city and suddenly sin creeping in and causing jealousy, immorality, sexuality, rivalry, and chaos between the people. Although Chaplin later left behind his Christian beliefs, he certainly didn't forget about the morality issues in the world and differences between a life full of love and one full of guilt and sorrow, which is basically how his own life looked like.

As far as comedy goes, *The Kid* focuses more on realism and the meaning or purpose of one's life rather than just comedy. But certainly, the film contains some humor. It's a little over-the-top, but it's innocent when speaking of the content and what's funny. Since the movie is a silent one, actors' actions and dramatic music really emphasize the mood of a specific scene. On top of that, the film is made using a fast-forward technique called time-lapse, which is how movies used to be made. It makes the characters look funnier. A good example of that is a scene in which Chaplin fights a man. Chaplin does nothing, but ducks, every time the man throws a punch at him. Because of the fast-forward feel, it looks a lot funnier as the Tramp quickly squats and in turn makes the man seem like a terrible fighter. I suspected the film to overall show how Chaplin overcame his childhood and possibly make fun of it as a result. But, I truly believe this movie and its contents are Chaplin's way of holding on to the love he never fully received from his father. He used humor because his own childhood was full of laughter as well, but deep inside he was actually grieving his younger years.

Nonetheless, one couldn't possibly understand Charlie Chaplin's life completely by only looking at his childhood and work. His personal life plays a significant role in the person Chaplin became, as well. Kuriyama in his article, *Chaplin's Impure Comedy: The Art of Survival*, goes a little in depth about Chaplin's first two marriages. Charlie Chaplin's first wife was named Mildred Harris and Chaplin married her, despite their iffy relations, only because she claimed she was pregnant. The claim was false, but soon Harris did actually become pregnant. Chaplin's first son was born deformed and died a few days later. Charlie Chaplin blamed himself for the baby's death and suffered his first extreme case of depression. Chaplin's film, *The Kid*, exposes these terrible times of grief and self-doubt that he faced after his son's death (30). Chaplin's later marriage to Lita Grey didn't produce much better effects or self-esteem for Chaplin than his first marriage. Grey was 16, same age as Harris, when Chaplin had met her. Having such a rough past, Chaplin became very anxious about Grey's pregnancies. With the coming of each of their two children, Charles Jr. and Sydney Chaplin, Chaplin worked like a maniac on films like *The Circus* and *The Gold Rush*. His desire to escape from his problems and his past and to perfect his films really showed when he insisted on over 700 takes on a tightrope with monkeys on him in *The Circus* and 200 takes in a cage with lions. Nevertheless, Kuriyama claims that Charlie Chaplin's inability to control his life actually drove him to perfect his films. He also believes that Chaplin wouldn't have been the same as an actor and a director if not for all the tragedy that occurred in his life (34-37).

Chaplin's first two marriages were unsuccessful, but things were bound to get better at some point. His third wife, Paulette Goddard, starred in Chaplin's movie *Modern Times*. But as it was claimed, marriage to her wouldn't last long either because "Paulette in the end, wanted a career, [and] Chaplin wanted a wife" (Wada 6). In 1942, Chaplin met Oona O'Neill. Charlie Chaplin was 54 at the time and Oona was only 18, yet she approached him more openly. They married in 1943. Despite the significant age gap, Oona was a caring mother to their eight children, but also a loving step-mother and wife (Wada 7). Supposedly, if Chaplin didn't go through those rough past relationships, he wouldn't have appreciated Oona so much. She supported him through everything, and stayed with him until the end. As Wada summarized it, "While Edna was Chaplin's ideal Girl on the silver screen, it was Oona who became his ideal girl in real life" ("Charlie Chaplin's Wives" 11). Chaplin had many great actresses and a few wives, but only Oona was able to fill Chaplin's heart with love and free him of his traumatizing past experiences. She stayed faithful to him until December 25, 1977, when he passed away. Ironically, Chaplin died on the day he despised the most:

Christmas (Wada 10). At least at that point, he was finally with people that loved and appreciated him for all his wonderful, artistic gifts that he dared to share with the world.

Charlie Chaplin once said that, “Humor...heightens our sense of survival and preserves our sanity. Because of humor we are less overwhelmed by the vicissitudes of life” (Kuriyama 29). Chaplin certainly tried to live up to that quote. He shared the wealth of his humor that is still truly appreciated today. He left behind a legacy like no other comedian; no one else can live up to the subtleness and sincerity of Mr. Chaplin’s comedy, while hiding their pain so well.

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