Interpretation of Life

Maurice Kirby*

*Iowa State College

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By Maurice Kirby

Popeye, the Sailor Man, Arises, Triumphant, to Identify Himself with the Romantic Movement.

GRANT WOOD has recently done some historic research in textiles and clothing. Perhaps this is symbolic—perchance artists are turning from the study of old masters' interpretations of life to the study of life itself. There is an art which, though not venerable, throughout its existence has consistently portrayed real life, and used, as Wordsworth said, "the language of men . . . ." This art is not realized for us by fair, white hands caressing golden strings, nor are its masterpieces hung on chapel walls. Yet it sways the emotions of the many just as truly as poetry tugs the heartstrings of the few, for laughter is just a little lower than tears.

I speak of the funny paper, at its best in the full page, Sunday variety. Here is an art which interprets life for those who live it.

For instance, there is Thimble Theatre—the very title is artistic in a whimsical sort of way. The figures which meet the
eye we recognize as human. Mechanically, the drawing is equal in fidelity and sincerity to the Library Murals, at least. Popeye, the hero of the skit, is a dashing brute who is simply bursting with Romantic qualities. He is a noble savage, more at home in the jungle than in the parlor. He is primitive; Thoreau would bless him for his faculty of making his living with his hands. And what could be more Romantically far away from us than a treasure-hunting, dragon-slaying sailor? Does Popeye love nature like a true Romantic? Yes, indeed! Every acre of spinach that he devours, every blushing blossom that he carries to his fair lady Olive Oyl is a token of his Romanticism. Finally, his "I yam what I yam and that's all that I yam," is certainly his acknowledgement of the doctrine of natural goodness. Popeye may yet descend in history as the Paul Bunyan of the Romantic Movement.

**Wimpy**, on the other hand, is a low person, a villain, a believer in high living and plain thinking. Like Chillingworth of "The Scarlet Letter," Wimpy is a figure of the terrible physical and moral effect of great sin. Wimpy's sin is one of the seven pillars of the mansion of evil—for Wimpy is a glutton. Food is the moral stairs down which he has fallen. He cannot enjoy the higher things, for his mind and soul have become his body's bondsmen. Life is no longer a ship laden with rewards for him. The world is his hamburger, and he its bellyslave. All his finer qualities have left him. Only his lust remains, and this monster has waxed unnaturally gross, for it has occupied the apartments in his soul formerly tenanted by his better self. No deed is too horrible when the immoral desire is upon him. He will shoot a man—commit murder in cold blood—for a hamburger. He will perpetrate the vilest deception to obtain a duck dinner. Yea, even the mere mention of his darling, the hamburger, is sufficient to raise him from the dead.

But he was not always so. By his own words, "My friend, there was a time when I was a gentleman of polish." We had best think of him as a subject for holy charity and say, as Anthony said over the dead Brutus, "This was a man."