

Anatomy of a Garfield Comic Strip



Figure 1: Garfield Comic Strip 9/23/2002

Jim Davis is the creator one of the most read and enjoyed comic strips published today, *Garfield*. In the strip, Garfield, a tubby orange housecat, wreaks havoc in the life and home of his owner Jon Arbuckle. Each weekday *Garfield* strip contains three panels. These three panels effectively divide the comic into its' three major parts: the Introduction, the Twist, and the Punch Line.

The Introduction, the first panel in the comic strip, contains two major parts: the scene and the characters. There are four major scenes in the *Garfield* strip: the Kitchen, Garfield's Bed, the Counter, and the Window Sill. Each of these locations alerts the avid reader of what the topic of the strip will be. If the scene starts in the Kitchen, the comic will generally be centered on food. If it centers on Garfield's Bed, the comic will focus on Garfield and sleeping. The Counter tells the reader that the scene will focus on the interaction between Jon, Garfield, and other supporting characters. And the Window Sill indicates the comic will focus on Garfield's way of life. There are two classes of characters that can be introduced in the first panel: main characters and supporting characters. Main characters include Garfield, his owner Jon, and Jon's other pet, the

dimwitted dog Odie. The supporting cast is represented by the Mail Man, the Veterinarian, and the cute and cuddly kitten Nermal. Figure 1 above is an example of a typical Garfield strip, in the first panel, the scene is set; on the Counter, and the main characters; Garfield and Jon, are defined as the focal points in the strip. The premise of the strip is introduced; Jon asks Garfield to do him a favor, and the story can move on.

In the second panel of the strip, the Twist, we are introduced to a turning point in the comic. In this panel, we have another two major part, the dialog and character expressions. The dialog in the Twist is generally supportive or informative, but since this is not the true nature of Garfield, the reader is left hanging to find out what diabolical scheme he is planning next. Character expressions also play a big role in the Twist. Garfield expressions fall under two categories: excited and bored. If Garfield is excited, and it is not about food, the reader knows a plan is about to unfold. Or, if Garfield looks bored, we know a witty remark will come in the final panel with a smug look on his face. In Figure 1, we can see that Garfield has an excited look on his face. Jon also looks happy in this panel leading the reader to the conclusion that Garfield will slash his hopes and leave him feeling unappreciated. With the Twist fully illustrated, we can move to the third and final panel to discover what the outcome of this adventure will be.

In the final panel of the strip, the Punch Line, the comic is concluded in a comedic fashion leaving the reader amused and craving more. A typical *Garfield* strip concludes in one of three ways: sarcasm, cruel acts, or surprise. Sarcasm usually concludes strips with Garfield and Jon. Witty puns and obvious explanations are the two ways in which Garfield sarcastically annoys Jon and ends the strip. Comics with Garfield and Odie or Nermal, usually end with cruel acts. Odie is Garfield's punching bag and is at the butt

end of many jokes in the series; while Nermal is the polar opposite of Garfield and annoys him immensely, which leads to Nermal's constant shipment to Abu-Dhabi. A comic with a surprise ending can include any combination of the characters and settings. Surprise endings are illustrated with shocked looks on one or more of the characters faces in a response to some unexpected dialog that develops in the final panel. Figure 1 includes Jon and Garfield and as expected, ends in sarcasm. Garfield's true nature comes out in this final panel where he sarcastically shoots Jon down, making him feel unappreciated and left on his own.

Jim Davis's *Garfield* is built with three parts, all of which play a crucial role in the development and execution of the comedic genius seen in the three panels of the weekday comic. The Introduction sets the scene while the Twist and Punch Line deliver the funny content that keep readers coming back for more.