

## Charlie Chaplin's "The Tramp" Character



One day in 1914, acting in *Auto Races*, a Mack Sennett Keystone comedy, twenty-four-year-old Charles Chaplin suddenly appeared in costume as a tramp, the persona that at once so endeared him to moviegoers that he became the most famous person in the world. His "little fellow," as Chaplin described his alter ego in his 1964 *Autobiography*, was based on 'contradiction'....Incorporating stock figures long a part of the English music hall traditions, Chaplin explored the incongruity and inherent absurdity of class distinctions.

...Like the music hall comedian, he created a distinctive costume for the Tramp: not the ubiquitous striped suit, but his own variation, an outfit befitting his acknowledgment of that original working-class audience.

If the tramp's pants were baggy, his coat was too tight and pulled at the seams. If his derby was small, his weather-beaten shoes, the fronts pointed precariously upward, were several sizes too large; he walked forward but his toes pointed ever outward. A small black 'toothbrush' moustache...'add[ed] age without hiding my expression,' Chaplin remembered.

The tramp is small, five foot four inches tall, and a scant 125 pounds...,with small hands and feet. His eyebrows are thick and dark. His eyes are blue, appearing very light on screen; they are outlined in black, setting them deep within his skull, to convey abiding sorrow. He substitutes wit and ingenuity for physical prowess....The tramp was Chaplin as he was physically, and as he might have been socially had he not been gifted with extraordinary talent as a comedian, a dancer, a pantomime artist, an acrobat and a musician.

His creation was 'many-sided,' Chaplin said, 'a tramp, a gentleman, a poet, a dreamer, a lonely fellow, always hopeful of romance and adventure...not above picking up cigarette butts or robbing a baby of its candy.' Hounded by the authorities in an endless often hilarious series of chases in which he was outnumbered by bullies twice his size, kicking his pursuer in the rear end was often his best and only defense. If the occasion warranted, Chaplin admitted, 'he will kick a lady in the rear—but only in extreme anger....'

Innocence humanizes the tramp....An inherent sense of dignity does not permit the Little Fellow to view himself as weak or inferior....He is never vindictive and refuses to acknowledge that he is being insulted. When people ignore him, he tips his hat.

Chivalry defines the tramp. He remains, as Chaplin said, a romantic who, for a time, in each of the films believes he will win the girl...because he bears generosity and a good heart...He does not resort to self-pity, but remains, always, an indomitable Everyman whose ingenuity, good heart and kindness are their own form of transcendence and must often be his only reward in an inhumane society....

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Nothing is more important in the Chaplin films than employment, which precedes love and the possibility of domestic tranquility, and here Chaplin reveals his most marked advance from the music hall stereotypes from which his tramp derives. Unlike the figures of English vaudeville, Chaplin places his Everyman within the economic structure of a faltering social order....

The tramp may be a farm laborer...an inmate...; an escaped convict...; an 'immigrant'...; a war recruit...; a janitor in a bank...; a 'shanghaied sailor'...; a day laborer...; a farmer...; a waiter...; a street musician...; or, in *Modern Times* (1936), a factory worker, a construction worker, a night watchman, a

mechanic's apprentice and a waiter. These are the venues to which his poverty carries him. He remains, always, a fortuitous step away from homelessness and starvation. Eating is paramount in the Chaplin film because the tramp never has enough to eat. Yet there is no idealization of labor, in keeping with an aesthetic of socialist realism. When the men have a choice of 'sewer work' of working in a brewery in *A Dog's Life* (1918), every one of them chooses the brewery....

In the affluent society, to which Chaplin points in *mise en scènes* filled with shiny new automobiles and fashionably dressed people, the tramp remains on the outside, his cane and derby pleading for the respectability he will not be granted, despite his inherent chivalry and good nature....Chaplin suggests that upward mobility is a phantasm given the present social configuration.

Social inequality is the premise of all the tramp films, with the tramp on the wrong side of the class divide. Yet the tramp retains his capacity for kindness....Images of suffering suffuse Chaplin's films, although visual gags invariably preclude the maudlin....

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....Chaplin continued to depict the horrors of poverty and the brutality of class distinctions in an America whose democratic principles had been under assault by the Palmer Raids of 1918-1921, precursors of Senator Joseph McCarthy's move to power through accusations that citizens were Communists, and be definition disloyal to their country.

Woodrow Wilson's Attorney General, A. Mitchell Palmer, conducted illegal searches and raids on the headquarters of unions and socialist organizations. In the wake of several bombings, Palmer declared that the Communists were about to overthrow the United States government, the excuse he gave for arresting without warrants and holding without trial workers whose only crime was that they belonged to the International Workers of the World [IWW or "Wobblies"]. In his defense of the right of business to ignore the demands of organized workers, by any means at hand, Palmer was aided y a special assistant, twenty-five-year-old John Edgar Hoover, who was soon to become the lifelong nemesis of Charles Chaplin. Palmer's agents seized resident aliens and succeeded in deporting several hundred supposed enemies of the state, among them anarchists like Emma Goldman.

No dissenter was safe as the press inflamed public opinion, promoting fear of terrorism. In 1919, Congress refused to seat a socialist representative from Wisconsin, Victor L. Berger, because he had evinced pacifist views during World War I. Berger was sentenced to twenty years in prison for sedition before his conviction was thrown out by the United States Supreme Court.

Ignoring that he was working in the midst of a 'Red Scare,' financially independent Chaplin did not censor himself. He portrayed his Little Fellow as a victim of capitalist exploitation and as the frequent target of a terrorist police force....

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Chaplin believed that the 'theme of life is conflict and pain,' and recalled years later that 'all my clowning was based on this.' His comedy, following the most conventional of plot formulations, involved 'the process of getting people in and out of trouble.' Humor best served these troubling themes, Chaplin believed, because 'it heightens our sense of survival and preserves our sanity...because of humor we are less overwhelmed by the vicissitudes of life.'

The origins of Chaplin's screen persona, as Chaplin himself noted, may be discerned in his Dickensian childhood. In his self-invention as the tramp who survives, even as he continues to suffer the abuses of capitalist society, Chaplin repeatedly re-enacted his own tumultuous early life. He dramatized how today's working man too easily becomes tomorrow's homeless tramp, the opening concept in *Modern Times*...

No twentieth-century artist was to reveal more sympathy for the poor and the outcast, for the working man. Chaplin offered not pity for the 'little fellow,' but admiration for this ordinary man with his endless capacity to survive, for his energy, fortitude, integrity, generosity and humanity. The Little Fellow remains a person without malice, no matter the abuse inflicted upon him by bullies, the rich and their hired hands, the police. Each of the Chaplin films with the Little Fellow at its center concludes in a spiritual victory.

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Chaplin became the great cinema poet of the Depression with *City Lights*, *Modern Times*, and *The Great Dictator*, a trilogy dramatizing the effect on the ordinary man of the global economic collapse. *Modern Times* would offer the American film its first realistic images of America under economic siege, unemployed workers filling the streets, perpetual strikes, the starvation of those crowded out of the economy and heart-rending Hoovervilles.

The *Great Dictator* connects the Depression with the rise of the Nazis. Chaplin defied the British, who threatened to ban the film should he make it, and the Jewish producers who urged him to desist because such a film could only further inflame the Nazis and anger Hitler. Chaplin replied that Hitler couldn't be any worse than he was.

Encouragement issued from Franklin Roosevelt, who told Chaplin he personally would ensure that *The Great Dictator* was distributed. American Communists refrained dutifully from criticizing Hitler during the period of the Hitler-Stalin Non-Aggression Pact. But Chaplin took no orders from Moscow when it came to his art—or his politics—and went ahead anyway. Defiantly he ignored the Communist Party line urging 'peace' during the period of the Pact.

In *The Great Dictator*, as in *Modern Times*, workers complain about the inhumane conditions of their existence, with the difference that in the later film they are promptly arrested and shot. At the end of this, his first sound film, Chaplin reveals he has something to say. Rejecting an aesthetic that, even at such a moment of urgency, forbids the didactic, Charles Chaplin the man steps out of character to address his audience.

Decrying the 'machines' that 'have left us in want,' no more here than in *Modern Times* does he blame the "Machine Age" for the world's troubles. Rather, it is those who own the machines, taking little notice of his needs, who have threatened the very survival of the Little Fellow. It is they who have permitted the rise of fascism.

**SOURCE:** *Modern Times*. Joan Mellen. London: Cromwell Press, 2006. [pgs. 6-14]