

## "Daffy Duck and Egghead" - Fighting Fire With Fool

by Joshua Siegal

In "Daffy Duck and Egghead," a Warner Brothers' Merrie Melodies cartoon from 1938, we are introduced to a character named Daffy Duck, whose chief characteristic, at this point in his film career, seems to be his deep insanity. It has been said that the truly crazy never ask themselves if they are crazy. Apparently, no one told that to Daffy Duck, who is fully aware of his own looniness. This begs the question: is he really crazy, or is he manipulating events and other characters for his own benefit? Fortunately, it is not the aim of this essay to diagnose the duplicity of Daffy's apparent mental ill-health. That would be too broad a question, way beyond our expertise, and would necessitate delving into the depths of the following idea: in the world of cartoons, is the rational irrational and vice-versa? We are not going to go there. For our purposes, it will suffice to assume that the duck named Daffy is crazy (or, at least, pathologically silly) and that Egghead, the duck hunter in this picture, is a caricature of a human being with at least a pretense of mental faculty, cruel to animals though he may be.

Psychologically, cruelty to animals is one warning sign of psychopathology. Before we indict thousands of hunters and their motives, we should note that, with the exception of his propensity for violence, Egghead seems a pretty normal, if humorously naive, individual. He represents the comic foil, the dupe. But there is something darker about him. He is a bit obsessed. Also, unlike Porky Pig, who hunts a proto-Daffy character in 1937's "Porky's Duck Hunt", Egghead has no canine sidekick. The absence of a dog may or may not reveal anything about Egghead's character, but unlike his predecessor, he is a loner. Sidekick notwithstanding, one thing is certain: in this short, Egghead represents a mortal threat to our hero (or anti-hero) Daffy, and he does so with violence and prejudice.

"Daffy Duck and Egghead" is a prime example of pitting violence against silliness in cartoons. Arising during the period between WWI and WWII, there is a distinctly anti-modern air to the contest in this short. By this point, cartoons had long made light of war, but often with the hero of the cartoon as a combatant, thus factoring out the concept of violence itself in the struggle. Not so with "Daffy and Egghead". Throughout this cartoon, the pursued (though hardly innocent) victim makes not a single act of true violence, even in self-defense, against the man who tries to kill him, despite ample opportunity. In the end, our hero (of course) escapes. We shall see what (if any) changes are wrought throughout the film between him and his aggressor.

Before the establishing shot of the cartoon, our antagonist sets the scenario: he and Daffy emerge from nutshells to give us the basic plot point (in a nutshell?): Egghead fires his rifle at Daffy, and the resulting smoke plume spells the words: *Duck Season Opens Today*. We are then treated to a smug, if slightly ominous disclaimer, that the "events and ducks in this photoplay are fictitious. Any similarity to actual ducks, either living or roasted is purely co-incidental." Note that Egghead is left out of this disclaimer. Perhaps his similarity to any number of violent individuals on the world stage in the 1930s is *not* co-incidental. That may be a reach, but it is not inaccurate.

The cartoon short opens with an idyllic establishing shot of a pastoral wetland, complete with cat-tails and tall grasses. The natural setting provides a perfect backdrop for the ensuing contest. The hunter and the duck will antagonize one another in an environment (almost) empty of

interference from other characters. A turtle provides a brief exception to this fact later in the cartoon, but he only serves to place the two in further opposition to one another. Additionally, the natural wilds as a setting is a long-used literary device that serves to bring the ethos of each character into relief.

Egghead joins this pastoral scene, sneaking across the foreground, and pauses to wonder if there are any more hunters around on this quiet morning. Indeed, there are - a chorus of "Ohhhhhhh yeah" accompanies the revelation of at least a score of other hunters, dressed identically to Egghead, lurking around the natural backdrop. We never see any of these hunters again in the film. Could this be a hint that Egghead is to represent more than just an individual who happens to be hunting in the film? Are these other hunters symbolically reduced into the character of Egghead, so that he is a figure of, at the least, men with guns? Even though we have just seen all the other hunters, none of them appear moments later when a duck quacks from a nearby stand of grass. Their appearance and disappearance could be simply a gag, but Egghead's reaction to the next series of events shows his colors well (no pun intended).

As Egghead crouches over to the stand of grass to find the duck, a silhouette crosses the foreground of the screen. A movie patron has rudely interrupted everyone by taking his seat during the film. Worse, he might frighten off the duck. Egghead entreats him to sit down and be quiet: hunting is in progress. Unfortunately, the distracting patron rises again, and again is chastised by Egghead. The man rises a third time, and Egghead shoots him in the chest. The man dies a dramatic, hammy death. Certainly, many actual patrons of this short were vicariously gladdened by the dispatch of a proxy for inconsiderate movie-goers. Egghead has also revealed himself here. He has not shot another caricature, but a reasonably lifelike form of a man, and a member of his own audience, nonetheless!

After his remorseless slaughter of a paying customer, a very self-satisfied Egghead dusts his hands. A job well done, evidently. Egghead will then peer through the tall grasses to search out his prey. Peeking his head through the sheaves like a dope, he is rewarded with a honking bite to the nose from Daffy, who reproaches him with a stern glance. Egghead's response: "That duck's craazy!" Here we see it in a capsule: murder is satisfying, and a bite on the nose is crazy. This is the true disposition of Egghead, one with which he will struggle throughout the film.

Daffy's response to the accusation of insanity is pure and complete agreement. He launches immediately into what will be his signature maneuver: leaping about in a display of ergonomically loony acrobatics, away toward the horizon, or at least away from trouble. Daffy uses insanity to distance himself from trouble, but is he ever really in danger? Throughout most of the picture, he appears to have the upper hand. Egghead next tries to snare Daffy with an ostensibly sexy wind-up female duck lure, complete with makeup and a bow on her head. After some possibly lascivious quacking from across the water, Daffy dumps his date back on the shore and plants a sign in the ground: "T'aint Funny McGee!" Apparently, Daffy has no fear of Egghead or his gun, because he makes a point of returning the mechanical duck-vixen right to Egghead's feet, and then taunts him from under the water, tying the barrel of Egghead's rifle in a knot.

Seemingly, Daffy has the ability to make use of cartoon-world surrealism, but Egghead does not. Or, at the least, he is tentative and easily discouraged. In the very next sequence, having tossed away his gun, Egghead lifts up the pond water like a carpet and checks underneath for his quarry. For his attempt at unarmed investigation, he receives another nose-bite from Daffy, who proceeds into another leaping, twirling frenzy of daffy joy. Daffy then swims up to the foreground to announce to the audience: "I'm not crazy - I just don't give a darn!" He's probably lying, but it makes no difference. His puckish tricks are an act of self-defense, for what if Egghead were to renounce the gun and try to make use of the same silliness with which Daffy shields himself?

We shall see, but for the moment, the reverse will occur. Daffy swims around behind Egghead and grabs the rifle (now un-knotted) from him. At this point, Daffy could theoretically end the threat from Egghead, but he does not. He merely tosses the rifle offscreen. Egghead and Daffy then become involved in a pistol duel mediated by a local turtle. After walking in the wrong direction for ten paces, Daffy turns and finds himself behind Egghead, who is apparently aiming at a duck who is not there. Here is another chance for Daffy to shoot Egghead, but he does not. Instead, Daffy watches as Egghead mistakenly shoots the turtle, and then awards him a cigar, *which does not blow up*.

Infuriated, Egghead reaches again for the rifle. Daffy is horrified, until he places an apple on his own head. As the orchestral soundtrack strikes up "The William Tell Overture", Egghead fires errant shot after errant shot, hitting a tree, the pond, and a barn, as Daffy marches ever closer. Finally, at point-blank range, Egghead misses both the duck and the apple. A disgusted Daffy hands Egghead a cup full of pencils, and hangs dark glasses and a "BLIND" sign on him. "Too bad," he mockingly clucks.

During the ensuing musical number, Daffy lauds his own dementia in song before shaking hands with his own reflection in the pond. Meanwhile, Egghead is back up to his tricks; having retrieved both his gun and his aim, he looks out through a visual pun of a hunter's blind (venetian blind). He spies Daffy and fires at him, but Daffy puts on a scary mask, and the shot from Egghead's gun retreat speedily back down the barrel. This points to two things: (a) that Egghead's failure to shoot anything close to Daffy during the William Tell sequence was a result of the power of Daffy's silliness and not bad aim (remember also the dead-on shot to the chest earlier); and (b) that silliness has a transitive property, which will come into play almost immediately.

At this crucial moment of the cartoon, with his prey in full insolence, Egghead does something remarkable for his character thus far. He, himself, resorts to silliness. Forgetting for a moment the dubious ethics of non-lethal weapons, it is important that when Egghead produces two white gloves attached to a spool of thread and fires the gloves from his rifle, he has converted from the power of violence to the power of silliness, and his attempt is successful. It is the only moment in the entire picture when he actually catches Daffy Duck. The white gloves fire off through space, grab the duck around the neck, bop him over the head, and, when reeled back by Egghead, drop the unconscious fowl neatly in a net. Egghead then throws away the gun and celebrates.

Poor Egghead. He has started out all wrong, and now he will pay the price. Another duck immediately drives up in an "Asylum Ambulance" and dupes Egghead rather quickly out of a duck dinner by proclaiming that Egghead has captured a wanted mental case and done a great service. "You know," the uniformed duck intimates, "we've been after this guy for months," and easily wrests custody of the netted Daffy. The duck-medic further confides, "he's absolutely ring-dingy...looney tune...and oofdey magoofdey." He then recapitulates the nose-honking of the beginning of the film (with a few boots to the posterior) and, together, the two ducks cavort off across the water to the horizon. His frustration at an extreme, Egghead seems to have no choice but to join them. And the film thus ends.

It's possible, given the ending, that this film is not a contest between silliness and violence in which the former wins, but a contest between physical and mental violence. This is doubtful, however. Lunacy for its own sake is treated in a rather juvenile, light-hearted manner in this cartoon, while the threat of violence drives all the dramatic tension. The one moment, near the end, where it seems as if Daffy might get treatment for his insanity (oh no!) turns out to be just a set-up for even greater silliness, which finally drives Egghead over the edge. Having joined the two ducks, he leaves his rifle behind.

So, does this cartoon (intentionally or otherwise) represent a distillation of the zeitgeist that the main choice for the modern (1938) world was between violence and insanity, or does it pick sides, choosing the Dada viewpoint that nonsense is a logical protest in such a world? For our answer, we turn to the reciprocal effect between Egghead's aggression and Daffy's silliness. Controlling the silliness for most of the picture, Daffy has a conceivably vast universe from which to draw. If his intent were to go beyond self-defense and into the realm of mental torture (as Bugs Bunny later seems to relish), he could at some point use this power to gain the upper hand. Instead, he wins in the end only by converting his enemy to his side and so is captured, a capture which turns out to be inherently ephemeral because it makes use of silliness. Throughout the film, Daffy's use of his own insanity never reaches beyond defense and into the realm of revenge. He is a slippery goofball, but the pain he inflicts on his hunter is only the result of his ability to dissipate Egghead's violence.

As for Egghead, he learns to fight fire with fire (or silly with silly). If he does represent the violent inclinations in humanity, history shows that he must have spent very little time frolicking in the water and must have returned rather quickly to scheming up ways to shoot daffy ducks.