

# Mickey Mouse as Teddy's Bear: The Political Cartoons of Clifford Berryman and the Origins of Disney's Iconic Character.

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## Mickey Mouse as Teddy's Bear: The Political Cartoons of Clifford Berryman and the Origins of Disney's Iconic Character

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### Abstract

Abstract:

This essay makes a case for a possible new source of influence on Mickey Mouse: the political cartoons of Clifford Berryman and his signature figure, Teddy's Bear. The visual similarities between Berryman's famous cub and Disney's Mouse are striking; I argue that they are too strong to be merely coincidental. Placing the

iconic Mouse in dialogue with Teddy's Bear adds a new dimension to oft-discussed elements within Disney animation, such as the construction of cuteness, the exploration (as well as exploitation) of innocence, and the treatment—along with Mickey's infamous early mistreatment—of animals.

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Since his starring role in the animated short *Steamboat Willie* in 1928, Walt Disney's Mickey Mouse has been connected with a variety of artistic, material, and cultural elements. First and foremost, in his physical appearance Mickey is a clear imitation of Disney's earlier animated creation Oswald the Lucky Rabbit. As Neal Gabler has written, the now-iconic Mouse is "essentially Oswald with shorter ears" (113). Second, both Oswald and Mickey share a kinship with another cartoon figure: Felix the Cat. In the words of Whitney Matheson, this silent-era star is the "feline forefather" of Disney's creations (par. 2). Finally, but far from insignificantly, Nicholas Sammond has discussed how many cartoon characters originating in this period—including Felix the Cat, Oswald the Lucky Rabbit, and Mickey Mouse—trafficked in the conventions of blackface minstrelsy. Sammond observes that "With their white gloves, wide mouths and eyes, and tricksterish behaviors, Mickey and his friends were just a few more in a long line of animated minstrels that stretches back to the beginnings of American commercial animation in the first years of the twentieth century" (2–3). As even this brief overview suggests, while Mickey was a new cartoon creation, he was also an amalgam of existing visual styles, animated characters, and performance modes.

This essay makes a case for a previously overlooked source of possible inspiration for Mickey Mouse: a well-known political cartoon by Clifford Berryman. In what has become an oft-recounted story, during a bear-hunting trip in Mississippi in 1902 Theodore Roosevelt had been unsuccessful in bagging any game. Then, on the final day of the excursion, his "guides tracked down an old black bear that the dogs had trailed quite a distance and attacked. The guides tied the bear to a willow tree and called for the President" ("Real," par.

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Michelle Ann Abate is an associate professor of literature for children and young adults at The Ohio State University. She is the author of four books of literary criticism: *The Big Smallness: Niche Marketing, the American Culture Wars, and the New Children's Literature* (Routledge, 2016), *Bloody Murder: The Homicide Tradition in Children's Literature* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), *Raising Your Kids Right: Children's Literature and American Political Conservatism* (Rutgers University Press, 2010), and *Tomboys: A Literary and Cultural History* (Temple University Press, 2008).



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