

Perfectly Looney!

Once Disney perfected animation in the late 1920s, many studios tried to emulate Disney's magic in their own creations. However, their cartoons greatly failed at this attempt and tirelessly included the same gags. They often became quite boring and predictable. *Looney Tunes* is the Warner Brothers studio's greatest achievement, because it introduced an entirely different style of animation. The animators of this studio took the huge risk of failure by going against the cartoon norm of that time period. "Rabbit Fire", a classic *Looney Tunes* short starring the famous duo of Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck, represents the many great qualities of extensive character development, modern humor, unusual sound effects with their precise timing, as well as beautiful direction within *Looney Tunes*, illustrating why audiences and animators alike are inspired by the series even today.

The Warner Brothers studio created "Rabbit Fire" in 1951 with director Chuck Jones. "Rabbit Fire" is actually part of a trilogy of cartoon shorts, each of which have Bugs and Daffy fighting over what hunting season it is: rabbit season or duck season. In "Rabbit Fire," Daffy Duck lures Elmer Fudd to Bugs Bunny's home for rabbit hunting season. When Elmer approaches Bugs Bunny with his gun, Bugs persuades him otherwise that it's duck season. Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck argue over the hunting season with Bugs outsmarting Daffy every time and making Elmer the center of attention. The cartoon ends with a twist, in which Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck are hunting Elmer, because it's actually "Elmer hunting season".

One of the best accomplishments of this cartoon short is the emphasis on the distinct characteristics of Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, and Elmer Fudd. Some of the earliest Bugs Bunny cartoons like "Hare-um, Scare-um" by Hardaway in 1939 and "Elmer's Candid Camera" by Jones in 1940 portrayed Bugs Bunny's character as an offensive, disturbing gray rabbit whose

crazy laugh possibly gave some viewers nightmares. He purposely messed with others for the fun of it. He was made out to be an unlikable character. The same goes for Daffy Duck. He could have been described as being high on sugar due to his in-your-face crazy behavior. “Rabbit Fire”, on the contrary, provides its audience with well-developed characters. Bugs Bunny is now a kind rabbit whose mischief has a motive. He doesn’t mess with people on purpose but rather when provoked. His most beloved trait is his fearlessness in the face of danger. In this short, when Elmer Fudd sticks a gun in Bugs Bunny’s face, one would expect him to scream and run, but instead, he pulls out a carrot and starts eating, meanwhile leaning against the rifle with an irritated yet sympathetic “Will this guy never learn?” expression that stuns the audience.

As for Daffy Duck, his basic character remains the same, being crazy and aggressive, but unlike in the previous shorts, this craziness is toned down to an extent. “Rabbit Fire” illustrates other key qualities about Daffy such as his greediness and selfish behavior. He’s willing to sacrifice nobody for himself. When he lures Elmer to Bugs Bunny’s home, he says, “survival of the fittest. And besides, it’s fun.” Although, Daffy sort of becomes the antagonist in many *Looney Tunes* shorts, the audience loves him and doesn’t think of him as an enemy. After he makes the rabbit footprints, he calls Bugs up from his hole by saying, “Oh Bugsy, Bugsy pal, there’s a friend here to see you” in such an innocent way, but the mischief behind this innocence as well as his spit-shooting lisp are what draws the audience to his character.

In addition, Elmer Fudd’s role is the hunter, but his nature isn’t evil. His unique laugh and childlike speech difficulty are aspects that represent how he only wants to have fun. It’s surprising when he claims to be a vegetarian. He says, “I just hunt for the sport of it.” He has no intention of actually killing a rabbit or duck when he says he’s hunting “wabbits.” Even though these characters are so different, “Rabbit Fire” shows how well they work together. By this time,

the audience is already aware of each character's unique personality. Therefore, it's enjoyable to see how any interaction between them plays out. The characters' humanlike emotions help the audience relate to them. The animators also drew Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck the same size as humans. If they were realistically drawn to scale, their interaction wouldn't have the same effect. If the characters had remained the same since their earliest cartoons, it's doubtful that *Looney Tunes* would be as popular.

Aside from lovable characters, "Rabbit Fire" contains modern humor. Many of the gags are violent, which some people consider to be the one flaw to the *Looney Tunes* comedy. However, the humor isn't gory or extremely vulgar like that in *Family Guy*. Although there's violence, the animators have depicted it in such a way that kids aren't negatively impacted by it. In "Rabbit Fire," Elmer Fudd uses a rifle to shoot bullets at Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck, but when the bullets strike Daffy Duck, they don't show him dripping with blood. Instead, the bullet goes into his skin, but the next moment, he reappears as normal like it never happened. Other times, the bullets dislocate Daffy's bill and he just snaps it back onto his face. Another funny gag in the short was the elephant gag, where Bugs tells Elmer he should be shooting elephants with an elephant gun, not rabbits. Then, Elmer turns around to Bugs in an elephant costume saying, "You do and I'll give you such a pinch" with Elmer being pounded down with the elephant's fist. It shows the Warner Brothers' animators taking a different approach to humor compared to past shorts. The humor is presented in ways realistically impossible and that's what makes it amusing.

At times, the characters' facial expressions bring laughter themselves especially those of confusion. In one scene, Bugs Bunny dresses up as a female hunter with Daffy as his dog to play with Elmer's feelings. It always makes things interesting when someone dresses up as something they're not supposed to be and actually fools their victim. The short seems to catch the audience

by surprise with Bugs Bunny's inventive pranks, one of its major attention-grasping qualities. The animators took traditional forms of humor and simply addressed them through different styles within their shorts, making them modern to the animation world.

There are many forms of visual humor in this short, but they wouldn't be complete without their sound sidekicks. Sound is an equivalent factor in a great joke. When Elmer's bullets strike Daffy, his bill swings around his face a couple of times. It sounds like a party noisemaker malfunctioning. It's a creative use of sound, because since it's an unrealistic action, we don't know how it would actually sound, like the familiarity we have with the sound of a door slamming. Watching Daffy's bill spin around his face without any sound destroys the animator's purpose of presenting his bill as an object that can be screwed or snapped back on. Furthermore, when Daffy is making rabbit footprints, without the musical note playing with each step he takes, that walk cycle isn't as interesting. If we were to see Daffy just walking, a specific motive behind that sound effect is gone. Besides humor, this sound effect is used to build up some suspense or anxiety for what's to come. At this point, the audience doesn't know that Daffy will lead the tracks to Bugs' home.

Another purpose of sound is adding quality to a character. For example, Elmer Fudd's laugh is certainly unique. In fact, his laugh was referenced in an episode of *Seinfeld* in which Jerry describes his new girlfriend's laugh sound like "Elmer Fudd sitting on a juicer." Besides humor, these sound effects play a significant role in the cartoon's viewing pleasure itself. They play at the precise moment they're needed, sometimes providing more information. For example, Elmer's rifle shots are made realistic through timing. When Elmer fires the first shot at Bugs, there's a slight whistle to it and this informs the audience that he's still a certain distance away from Bugs at that point. The sound effects are used to enhance the cartoon.

However, no matter how these qualities enhance the cartoon, a lack of creative directing can ruin even the best cartoons. Chuck Jones' directing in "Rabbit Fire" captured what the *Looney Tunes* humor is all about. He took normal activities of that time and made comedy out of them. For example, hunting was probably a regular sport back then. He took the basic idea of a hunter hunting a small animal and poked fun at him. Many of the Bugs Bunny cartoons have a hunting scenario. Chuck Jones takes the traditional plot of Elmer hunting Bugs Bunny and adds in Daffy Duck to double the pranks. He broadens the range of humor in "Rabbit Fire" through a three-way rivalry: Bugs vs. Daffy, Bugs vs. Elmer, and Daffy vs. Elmer. Despite the evident repetition of certain gags like Daffy's bill being dislocated, the cartoon manages to continue entertaining the audience. Chuck Jones' style of direction involved toying with his characters. He experimented with the characters in his cartoons to see which exaggerations made them work and which didn't. Lines in "Rabbit Fire" such as "You're despicable" and "Be vewy, vewy quiet. I'm hunting wabbits" made their way through several cartoons, because they agreed with the character's nature.

In addition, Jones originally started out in Warner Brothers in an effort to mimic Disney's hyper-realistic style. Disney ironically once said, "All cartoon characters and fables must be exaggeration, caricatures. It is the very nature of fantasy and fable" (Walt Disney Quotes). Chuck Jones eventually ended up doing just that by mocking Disney's animation style. It's obvious that the *Looney Tunes* cartoons involved extensive exaggeration at some moments and didn't use the same form of story telling. "Rabbit Fire" shows how Bugs and Daffy directly address their audience at the end when they say, "Be very, very quiet. We're hunting Elmers" whereas Disney's approach to his stories is the classic sense of story telling from a 3rd person perspective.

Furthermore, there is a sense of natural order and certain values in Disney movies like *Bambi* grieving the loss of his mother, learning from death, and moving on to fulfill his duty as the next prince, while in “Rabbit Fire,” Daffy’s unnaturally spinning bill has no effect on Bugs. There is a different level of moral values as well as certain universal themes such as friends vs. enemies, survival, and human nature portrayed in *Looney Tunes*. In “Rabbit Fire” specifically, the universal themes of survival and human nature exist. Chucks Jones’ direction in “Rabbit Fire” is considerably different than Disney but gives this short its further appeal and introduces the audience to a new animation style.

Looney Tunes, although officially created as we know it today in the 1940s, still influences the children of this generation and will continue to for many more to come. “Rabbit Fire” displays the key qualities for its massive popularity, such as well-developed characters and their amusing interaction, unexpected gags, the precise timing of its unusual sound effects as well as Chuck Jones’ experimental direction style. These embellishments all demonstrate why this cartoon series should truly be considered the second pinnacle of perfection in animation. Without them, its viewers still remain unsatisfied by the time each short signs off with “That’s all, folks.”