

MEMES AS MEANS: USING POPULAR CULTURE IN LITERATURE CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

Internet memes serve as markers of a lively digital culture. Memes, in Dawkins' view, are small aspects of our culture that spread from one person to another through imitation or copying. Due to the expansion of digital culture over the past few decades, memes have thus been the focus of many research. Memes are one of the major reasons behind the widespread usage of social media among youngsters. Therefore it can be introduced in education field to enhance the engagement level among students and their motivation to actively participate in classroom activities. Memes and Shakespeare can be linked by their universal quality. More than any other writer, he possessed the ability to imagine what it would be like to be another person and to design the wide variety of human emotions into a few, incredibly expressive, simple sentences. Being called an "Universal Genius of the Highest Order" by Harold Bloom, Shakespeare has the ability and capacity for understanding human desires, passion, motives, and deep inner conflict. With the twentieth century's massive reinvention in many aspects, teaching has shifted to digital culture. Every attribute of Shakespeare's play can be well showcased using memes. Be it character analysis of Richard 3, the Oedipus Complex criticism of Hamlet, comparisons of adaptations, plot of As you like it etc., everything can be displayed in a comical way as a meme and thereby teaching is made simply digital. This paper attempts to study Shakespeare's genius as a playwright in plot construction, character development etc., through memes. The memes are originally created by one of the authors of this paper.

KEYWORDS: *memes, popular culture, humor, criticism, classroom environment*

INTRODUCTION

The advent of the Internet has caused a paradigm change in the realm of education. Learners can discover the most recent and pertinent information available worldwide by using the internet and search engines like Google and Yahoo. This has provided a booster for students' independence during the learning process. However, this has made it more difficult to create bonds between teachers and students (Harshavardhan et al., 2019). It's challenging for students to remain seated in a classroom for long periods of time listening to lectures. Additionally, they find it difficult to pay attention or take notes throughout the presentation. The move towards more engaging educational tools, such as interactive multimedia presentations aims to create a dynamic and stimulating learning environment where students are motivated to actively engage in their own learning as well as be receptive to knowledge.

The use of popular culture in the classroom has become an effective instrument for engaging students more deeply. In order to create exciting and relatable learning experiences, educators are drawing on the contexts of music, movies, social media, and video games that today's students are already familiar with (Domínguez Romero & Bobkina, 2021). Teachers can close the gap between academic material and students' interests by introducing parts of popular culture into their courses, making the subject matter more approachable and fun. Memes have essentially taken over social media platforms and online interactions, becoming an integral element of popular culture. These witty, accessible, and bite-sized pieces of content have a lot of promise for inclusion in the educational environment. By utilising memes in the classroom, teachers can take advantage of students' attitudes to be digital natives and develop a shared vocabulary that speaks to their experiences and interests (Huang, 2016).

The objective of this article is to investigate the novel potential of memes as a fresh and interesting method of introducing Shakespeare's plays to students. It aims to increase students' understanding of Shakespeare's complex craft of character creation and narrative building by utilising the popularity and relatability of memes. This paper examines a number of Shakespearean plays, utilising memes as a technique to draw attention to important themes, character qualities, and plot developments. By using this modern approach, this conceptual study intends to encourage students to take an active role in their own learning while also fostering a greater knowledge and appreciation for Shakespeare's timeless works.

DISCUSSION

Meme 1 is adapted from a Tamil movie to discuss the shift in the character of Hamlet. The character in the movie is introduced as a very obedient and respectable son, who leaves for work only after worshipping his parents in the morning. He even kisses his parents' feet. But when the scene shifts to evening, he is actually a drunkard who abuses his parents verbally and physically. The alcohol completely changes his behavior only in the evening. When his mother asks how he could utter such from the same mouth that worshiped them in the morning, he replies with his most celebrated dialogue, "That mouth praises! This mouth curses!"



FIGURE 1. MEME 1

Hamlet is celebrated as one of Shakespeare's best pieces. Hamlet's madness acts as a key tool in finding out the murderer of his father. However, before his little 'act', he seems to be such a devoted son, who only listens to his mom, and obeys anything his mom says. Madness brings out the true emotions of Hamlet about his mother's marriage with his uncle Claudius and also acts as a better reason for him to speak his heart out. According to Freud, "The child takes both of its parents, and more particularly one of them, as the object of its erotic wishes." Though Freud's Oedipal complex was not introduced back then,

it is evident that Shakespeare saw the personality complex as Freud did (Robson, 2009). There are several reasons that Hamlet could have been mad at his mom. Firstly, his mom was happy when his father died and seemed to be celebrating his death. Secondly, she was ready to send his son away from her and the city. Thirdly, she was not there for Hamlet, who was extremely in need of parents' care, as he had already lost one. Out of all these, Hamlet chose to yell at his mom and insult her by talking about her marriage to his uncle, with his focus is on her relationship with his uncle, but not on the damage done to Hamlet. Being a single meme with the most important dialogues, this has the power to touch upon all these aspects, from Oedipal complex or sexism or loneliness, etc. Also, there is a common understanding that alcohol can trigger the consumer's past memories and thereby intensify their emotions. Hamlet uses 'madness' to express how he actually feels about his mother. This meme has the language barrier as its major challenge in relating to it. The learners, as well as the language teacher, should be familiar with the particular scene from the movie and its context to grasp the comparison and actively participate in the discussion on Hamlet's character



FIGURE 2. MEME 2

Meme 2 is about a man who ignores the one girl who he is with and instead focuses on another girl from a distance. This meme holds the crust of the play *Hamlet*'s theme, which is procrastination. Shakespeare uses procrastination to destroy the sense of satisfaction after killing the villain of the plot. Considering his tragedies like King Richard II, Macbeth, Othello, etc., where the death of the villain gives a sense of pleasure to the readers, in Hamlet, when he kills Claudius at the end, the audience do not get

such satisfaction. The audience has already given up on the idea that Hamlet would seek revenge and is not interested in the revenge anymore. Because Hamlet has ignored all the easy chances that he could have killed his uncle. But he chose to kill him only at the end, and that too, only after he is certain of his own death in a few moments. Shakespeare created his play Hamlet to be this way, not to provoke any kind of achievement sensation towards the end, because he knew that this concept of ‘delaying the revenge’ is going to take *Hamlet* places, and so far, it has also been celebrated as a masterpiece despite being one of the most unavoidable flaws of *Hamlet*. This meme might appear to be simple but opens up the discussion.

Meme 3 has two extreme reactions of a Hamster, the second cartoony depiction of it working out ferociously, the second of it being freaking scared to death.

“... I have given suck, and know How tender ‘tis to love the babe that milks me; I would, while it was smiling in my face, have pluck’d my nipple from his boneless gums, And dash’d the brains out, had I so sworn As you have done to do this.” (Shakespeare, 124)

‘Oh light! Please take me! I deserve to die! Now take me light!’

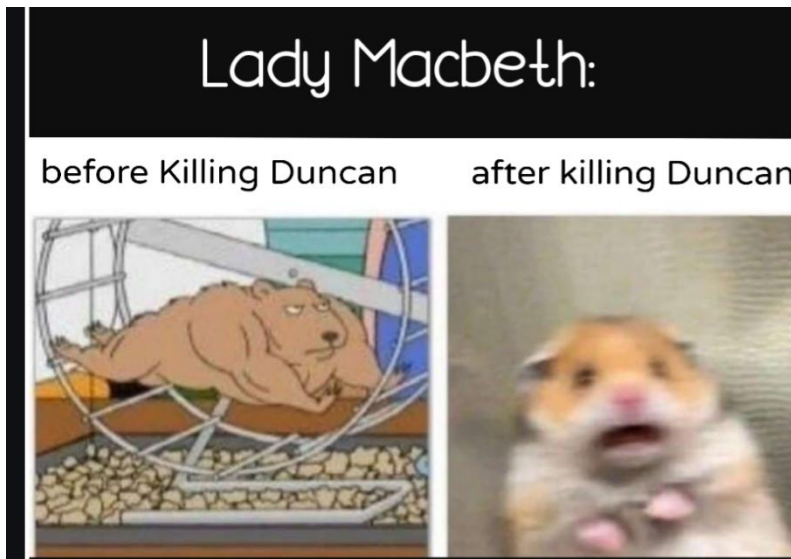


FIGURE 3. MEME 3

The Hamster’s change in expression could be related to the transformation of the character Lady Macbeth. Shakespeare has constructed Lady Macbeth to stand along with his other villains for her extremely cunning attitude and ambition. Lady Macbeth is shown to have the greatest ambition in killing

Duncan and taking over his place. Her dialogues in the play couldn't be any ruder. However, once the murder is done, her character goes through a rollercoaster. When the hideousness of murder pricks her consciousness, her nature begins to change. This complicated construction of her character is what makes her possess the supremacy of will and cruelty, among other Shakespearean heroines with a the paucity of intellect. She displays far greater strength of will than Macbeth does. This meme is a dedication to Lady Macbeth, who is called as 'Clytemnestra of English tragedy' and 'a natural foil to Macbeth'. It's another proof that Shakespeare is the master of character construction.

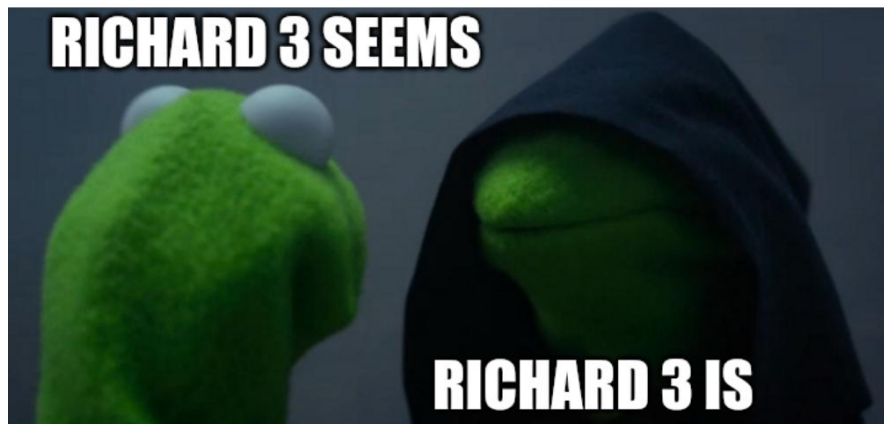


FIGURE 4. MEME 4

Meme 4 represents the Hermit cartoon, which sees itself different from how it appears. This can be viewed as the character of Richard 3 in a single image. Richard 3 is never what he says or shows. In Richard the third, Shakespeare went above and beyond by expanding his exploration of stigma, with Richard emerging as both a twisted narcissist who takes joy in the perception of his deformity and revisionist who seeks to alter the very definition of deformity. Richard is vile, dishonest, cruel, and cunning, and he would do anything to become king. His political expertise, linguistic skill, and intelligence keep the audience enthralled and his subjects and competitors under his grip. Richard is celebrated as one of the most successful villains in Shakespeare's works. He has mastered the skill of deception in manipulating every character. He brilliantly maintains a different version with each character, which helps him to carry out his crimes. He is also successful in not being caught till the end of the play.



FIGURE 5. MEME 5

Meme 5 shows a clown getting ready, step by step, to make a fool out of himself. When this image is connected with Caliban from 'The Tempest' boasting about the richness of his land takes on a deeper meaning of colonization, subjugation, and slavery—simply put, 'Digging one's own grave'. Caliban has been a slave of Prospero for years. Being the only native of the island, Caliban always wanted freedom for himself and his land. In context, Caliban has only just tasted liquor for the first time, and is paying lip service to Trinculo in order to get more. A valid modern interpretation involves having Caliban played by an indigenous person. This interpretation highlights the dangers of the introducing liquor to unsuspecting native populations and at the same time insinuates that Caliban is the rightful guardian of the island while Prospero is the usurper. The concept of slavery has been ingrained in his mind due to years of exposure to it. Therefore, he unconsciously surrenders himself even to new visitors, once again digging his own grave as a slave, but this time under new masters. In this context, the mind is colonized, and to support this argument, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's book 'Decolonising the Mind' can be introduced in class.

CONCLUSION

Memes can be employed as a teaching tool to enhance learners' motivation, participation and learning output. It also brings the teacher a step closer to learners, as it is an effort to teach by adapting to the learners' background. The fundamental condition for using memes in the classroom is that the teacher should not use them just because it's possible, but rather because the content demands it. Technology has the potential to make an easier concept complex and vice versa. A single meme can create a platform for a wide-ranging discussion, allowing every learner the chance to express their ideas and opinions. Memes also serve as knowledge-building tools, allowing learners not only to understand a particular scene or dialogue from a play but also to explore criticisms, themes, and more.

In modern classrooms, memes can help lower tension in the learning environment, grab learners' attention, and increase recall. where distraction levels are fairly high. Online memes appeal to young individuals. Memes in the mother tongue are useful teaching tools as they offer cultural support. While memes may not be the most effective primary resource for lesson preparation and curriculum building, they should still be taken into account as a potential tool that can be utilized sometimes in the classroom. They can help educate learners not just about the literary text but also about the criticisms and theories pertaining to the text. A delicate balance is needed when incorporating popular culture into the classroom, though. These allusions ought to be age- and culturally-appropriate and in line with the learning objectives, according to educators. Teachers can improve student motivation, improve information retention, and cultivate a lifetime enthusiasm for learning by thoughtfully and deliberately fusing educational content with elements of popular culture.

However, a few factors need to be considered while including memes in teaching-learning process. It can be challenging to introduce memes in heterogeneous classrooms, which includes learners from different background. Some of the learners might not be in social media and exposure to a meme itself can be new to them. In that case the teacher can involve the learners in pair or group activity to have a discussion on popular memes on social media. Learners with different language background: Consider meme1, the template of the meme is taken from famous Tamil movie comedy scene. There are high chances that learners from different background or sometimes, learners from the same language background who haven't watched this scene will not understand the meme and the idea delivered by it. Therefore, the teacher has to know the background of the learners and use appropriate memes that are comprehensible to them. The age group of the learners acts as a hindrance factor in using memes. Memes

can be exciting and interesting to learners in school level and undergraduate level. Tertiary level learners may perceive memes as humor content rather than learning content. By involving students in exposure and interpretation of Shakespearean memes, teachers can promote critical thinking, discussion, and deeper connections to the plays.

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