CATCHY QUOTES AND INSIDE JOKES: INTERTEXTUAL STRATEGIES IN LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND CULTURAL STUDIES CLASSES

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Abstract: *When the protagonist of the acclaimed 1989* Dead Poets Society *challenges his rather reluctant students to employ an intertextual form of address ("Oh Captain! My Captain!") a unique pedagogical interaction ensues. Using Weir's cinematic production, Alan Bennett's 2004* The History Boys and *Kenneth Goldsmith's 2004 'Uncreative Writing' course as its main starting points, this paper aims to explore a variety of intertextuality-based communication and teaching strategies that could be applied in language, literature or cultural studies classes. The eclectic and occasionally multimedial experiments conducted or inspired by John Keating and Douglas Hector, combined with incursions into the vast repositories of digital texts freely available to all Internet users, would lend themselves to countless contemporary adaptations. Such an approach would have the double advantage of capitalizing on the common cultural background of those present and exploiting the entertainment value and quotability potential of famous lines ranging from canonical poetry and fiction to film dialogues, advertising slogans, political discourses and the hilarious captions accompanying the ubiquitous memes of the present.*

Keywords: Dead Poets Society*, intertextuality, meme, playgiarism,* The History Boys.

Introduction: The Keating Model

Three decades after the release of Peter Weir's *Dead Poets Society*, the clash between John Keating's unorthodox teaching methods and the "stultifying environment" (Ellsmore 74) of Welton Academy is still widely regarded as one of the most iconic anti-establishment stances captured on the screen. Ranging from unbridled admiration of his "inspirational, and at times transgressive pedagogy" (McLaren and Leonardo 276) to more cautious assessments of his "dangerously transformative moral-aesthetic odyssey with hero-worship of the Romantic poets at its heart" (Atherton, Green and Snapper 28), the numerous and varied responses to Mr. Keating's modus operandi suggest that the relevance and applicability of his approach extend far beyond the education debate of the late 1980s and the academic environment at large. Depending on one's degree of optimism, his strategies can be emulated in the pursuit of that elusive Holy Grail of pedagogy referenced in the title of Michael Connolly's *Teaching Kids to Love Learning, Not Just Endure It* or, somewhat less ambitiously, in judicious "environmental selection" (Sternberg and Grigorenko 9) or spontaneous reconfiguration of classroom layouts:

> Keating evidently was aware of the need to place himself in the most attention-getting position in the room, in spite of the constraints of the prep school's classroom. So we saw Keating in one memorable scene actually standing on the desk to deliver his lecture and, in another instance, kneeling down between rows of students so that they could huddle around him as he revealed an important insight about literature. (Tauber and Mester 59)

Far from remaining confined to scholarly scenarios, Keating's insistence on the need to "constantly look at things in a different way" can – and has been – implemented in fields as diverse as marketing (Parrington and Stone 481) and mindfulness: "When we find ourselves

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in a tough spot, we need to remind ourselves that there is usually an alternative way of looking at the situation. Shifting our perspective is the first step to changing our reality." (Ben-Shahar 263) Indeed, the decision to use some of the lesson tactics employed in *Dead Poets Society* as the starting point of this paper was prompted by other considerations than its renown as a "teaching film in a wide range of topics, including innovative teaching techniques, teacher/student relationships, mentoring, and lessons on empowerment and individualism" (Sperry 309). Rather than take a definite side in the ongoing debate on the extent to which Mr. Keating succeeded in inspiring his initially wary and apathetic students to love poetry and think for themselves, this study aims to explore the *interdisciplinary dimensions and synergic potential of his approach, in an endeavour to identify feasible communication and pedagogical strategies to use within and beyond the sanctum of literature classes.*

"Oh Captain, My Captain?"

Appropriately enough, the most endlessly quoted line from a script otherwise replete with cultural echoes and memorable turns of phrase is the literary citation which marks the beginning and ending of Mr. Keating's rather brief tenure and defines the parameters of the pedagogical practices deployed during this interval: "'Oh Captain, My Captain!' Who knows where that comes from? […] Not a clue? It's from a poem by Walt Whitman about Mr. Abraham Lincoln. Now in this class you can call me Mr. Keating. Or, if you're slightly more daring, Oh Captain, My Captain." (Weir) Notwithstanding the conditional nuance present in this first instance of classroom policy, Keating's subsequent refusal to react to any other appellative – "Mr. Keating? Mr. Keating? Sir? Oh Captain, My Captain?" (Weir) – belies his apparent willingness to allow his charges to exit their academic comfort zone at their own pace.

At later stages of their hectic epistemic journey, uncle Walt's verses and his commanding visual presence are used to reinforce the value of a literary education and to coerce **the most listless and diffident student in the group into producing his own brand of poetry. Their most important function within the cinematic narrative remains that of secret code, with each new iteration cementing the sense of almost transgressive camaraderie** established between teacher and disciples. In the course of this first encounter however, their centrality is obscured by Keating's rapid and baffling transition from American humanism to 17th-century English poetry and Horatian aphorisms:

> Keating: Mr. Pitts, would you open your hymnal to page 542 and read the first stanza of the poem you find there?
> Pitts: "To the virgins, to make much of time"? […] "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may, old time is still a flying, and this same flower that smiles today, tomorrow will be dying."
> Keating: Thank you Mr. Pitts. "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may." The Latin term for that sentiment is Carpe Diem. Now who knows what that means? (Weir)

The Herrick love lyric, ventriloquized and attributed to the previous, now dead generations of students, not only "makes the teacher/student relation a homosocial one and levels the distinction" (Burt 265) between them, but also encourages and validates the boys' playful appropriation of canonical texts for their own purposes:

> Charlie: 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

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Thou art more lovely and more temperate.'
Tina: That's so sweet.
Charlie: I made that up just for you. […] I'll write one for you too, Gloria. […]
She walks in beauty like the night.
Of cloudless climes and starry skies.
All that's best, dark and bright,
Meet in her aspect and her eyes.
Gloria: That's beautiful.
Charlie: There's plenty more where that came from. (Weir)

While the little exercise in deception featured above might be construed at best as a practical application of Keating's postulate that "language was developed for one endeavor, […] To woo women." (Weir) and at worst as a cavalier exploitation of the girls' gullibility, it has to be noted that at this stage in the narrative Charlie's ingeniousness has already singled him out as a true postmodernist. The inspired juxtaposition of a 1959 Playboy centrefold and a (slightly misquoted) 17th century lyrical text Neil initially assumes was written by his smug classmate could be in fact regarded as a perfect illustration of the distinction drawn by Federman between the exuberance of "playgiarism" and its sad and apologetic relation, plagiarism (419-420). Moreover, Charlie's experiment manages to simultaneously highlight the timelessness of certain ideas and linguistic constructs, emphasise the importance of context to cultural guesswork, demonstrate the limited overlap between various readers' familiarity with the literary canon, and provide Pope's facetious rhetorical question – "Who now reads Cowley?" (300) – with a belated and unexpected answer:

Charlie: Teach me to love? Go teach thyself more wit.
I, chief professor, am of it.
The god of love, if such a thing there be,
may learn to love from me.
Neil: Wow! Did you write that?
Charlie: Abraham Cowley. Okay, who's next? (Weir)

It is perhaps equally interesting to observe that most of these points, as well as yet another reminder of the interchangeable status of students and teachers, also emerge from McAllister's hasty misattribution of the lines mock-solemnly recited (as well as composed) by his new colleague: "But only in their dreams can man be truly free. / 'Twas always thus, and always thus will be." (Weir)

When the presumptive author of Keating's couplet does eventually make an appearance in the text, this occurs not in the formal environment of the English classroom but in the clandestine space of the cave, when Neil selects the rousing exhortation to "strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield" (Weir) as his contribution to the newly resurrected tradition: "You see we'd gather at the old Indian cave and take turns reading from Thoreau, Whitman, Shelley; the biggies. Even some of our own verse. And in the enchantment of the moment we'd let poetry work its magic." (Weir) Some viewers might be tempted to regard the contrast between the boys' enthusiastic renditions of excerpts from "The Prophet," "Ulysses" or Vachel Lindsay's "The Congo" and the collective groan that greets Mr. Keating's announcement of a class on Shakespeare as one of the film's inconsistencies. An alternative interpretation would however focus on how the element of personal choice and the presentation strategies employed – in this particular case, a master ventriloquist's

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impersonation of Marlon Brando and John Wayne performing Shakespeare (Berman 80) – can turn a topic regarded as on par with "root canal work" (Weir) into a highly entertaining experience.

Equally tangible evidence of Keating's innovative and interdisciplinary vision emerges from his incorporation of poetry into an ostensibly athletic activity: "Robert Frost said, 'Two roads diverged in a wood and I, I took the one less travelled by, and that has made all the difference.' Now, I want you to find your own walk right now. Your own way of striding, pacing." (Weir) While some of the more outlandish creative writing or performance-based tasks he sets might appear to be of greater benefit to the few artistically inclined students in the class, future doctors, businessman and politicians also stand to gain from the wide range of exercises encouraging them to think laterally, broaden their horizons, circumvent rigid standards or simply activate the potential of their passive vocabulary:

> Keating: A man is not very tired, he is exhausted. And don't use very sad, use- […] Come on, Mr. Overstreet, you twerp,
> Knox: Morose?
> Keating: Exactly! Morose. (Weir)

Notwithstanding his often mystifying initiatives and rather questionable classroom practices, Keating's holistic view of education and his unwavering "faith in the power of language" (Berman 79) pervade the still compelling defence of the humanities delivered at the end of his eventful second lesson: "Medicine, law, business, engineering, these are all noble pursuits, and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love, these are what we stay alive for." (Weir)

"Pass it on, boys."

Set in a shabby but unexpectedly forward-looking "boys' school in the eighties in the north of England" (Bennett 3), Alan Bennett's 2004 play *The History Boys* and its 2006 film adaptation tackle the same "long-standing concerns about the efficacy of traditional educational practices" (Phillips 155) that permeate Weir's film as well as a still growing corpus of literary and cinematic texts. While the relaxed classroom atmosphere and the students' encyclopaedic knowledge indicate a very different policy from the reign of academic terror characterising Nolan's exclusive and conservative establishment, the administrators' single-minded focus on history scholarships relegates language and literature classes to the same marginal position they occupied in the Welton curriculum. As it happens, the euphemistically titled General Studies timetable slots threatened with takeover by an allegedly more useful subject consist of an apparently chaotic yet harmonious medley of English literature, French conversation, popular music and cinema studies that ultimately provide the students with the very edge over the other candidates the headmaster assumes they lack: "Think charm. Think polish. Think Renaissance Man." (Bennett 9)

Hector's "Socratically eroticized approach to education, or rather anti-education" (Phillips 153) is based, like Keating's, on "faith in the redemptive power of words" (Bennett 49) and a strong sense of kinship. While many of his own lexical choices are decidedly arcane, the classroom dynamics detailed in the play's first act highlight how effectively he has cultivated in his apparently insouciant students the scholarly rigorousness and terminological precision expected of historians, magistrates, solicitors or teachers, to name but a few of the career paths revealed in the denouement:

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> You will see from the timetable that our esteemed Headmaster has given these periods the euphemistic title –
>
> *Posner looks up the word in the dictionary.*
>
> – of General Studies.
> Posner: 'Euphemism… substitution of mild or vague or roundabout expression for a harsh or direct one.'
> Hector: A verbal fig-leaf. The mild or vague expression being General Studies. The harsh or direct one, Useless Knowledge. The otiose – (*Points at Posner.*) – the trash, the department of why bother? (Bennett 5)

Not one to concern himself "with what he was educating these boys for" (Bennett 107), Hector also tacitly challenges the boundaries between linguistics and literary studies; the textual analyses conducted during his classes do justice to every single language-related decision made by the writer in question, moving beyond the usually targeted level of figures of speech:

> 'Uncoffined' is typical Hardy usage.
> A compound adjective, formed by putting 'un-' in front of the noun. Or verb, of course.
> Un-kissed. Un-rejoicing. Un-confessed. Un-embraced.
> It's a turn of phrase he has bequeathed to Larkin, who liked Hardy, apparently.
> He does the same.
> Un-spent. Un-fingermarked.
> And with both of them it brings a sense of not sharing, of being out of it. (Bennett 55-56)

As far as solidarity is concerned, this is achieved not only through "a shared, which is to say memorized, knowledge of poetic verse" (Phillips 153) but also via an ongoing exchange of witty retorts, light-hearted taunts and epistemic challenges. In the same way in which Alan Bennett's deceptively simple comedies reside in an "ambiguous register where high and low comic tonalities co-exist without highlighted demarcation," (Svich 368) Hector's classes occasion seamless shifts from "attempts to teach the subjonctif and the conditionnel in an imaginary French brothel" (Feldman 1) to an impromptu re-enactment of the aftermath of Ypres, from one discipline to another and from classical literature to popular culture. Somewhat surprisingly, the latter turns out to have been included not so much in an attempt to indulge the boys and ensure their cooperation as out of a wish to protect them against future grief: "it's an antidote. Sheer calculated silliness." (Bennet 94)

Teacher and students alike quote, perform, paraphrase or reference lines (occasionally amounting to entire poems) from A.E. Housman's *A Shropshire Lad*, Shakespeare's *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Hamlet* and *Love's Labor's Lost*, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, Wilfred Owen's "Anthem for Doomed Youth," Philip Larkin's "MCMXIV," "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered," Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, S.T. Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," W.A. Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, "Gerontion" and "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service," *Now Voyager*, Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, W. H. Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" and "Lullaby," Pascal's *Thoughts*, Stevie Smith's "Voices Against England In The Night," *Brief Encounter*, Thomas Hardy's "Drummer Hodge," *The Seventh Veil*, George Formby's "When I'm Cleaning Windows," Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Gracie Fields' "Sing as We Go" and "Wish Me Luck as You Wave Me

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Goodbye," Frances Darwin Cornford's "On Rupert Brooke," The Pet Shop Boys' "It's a Sin" and "Bye Bye, Blackbird".

Markedly "less literary than the stage version, less a farrago of clever boys performing with language" (Hunter 305), the film adaptation has the merit of providing a visual representation of the daunting intertextual scope of Hector's manner of teaching in the form of a classroom bulletin board covered in "hundreds of cut-out photographs and art reproductions […] antique Greek heads, views of Italy, film posters for *Gilda* and *Juarez* and *In Which We Serve*, a portrait of Byron, a portrait of Charles Laughton, a portrait of Orson Welles as Kane." (Hunter 303) An appropriate background for the wide-ranging conversations, animated role-playing and exhaustive tutorials conducted in the room, this postmodern collage hints at the vast archives of "culture that Hector has thought worth teaching the boys and thus the history of his pedagogic career, the store of adult experience" (Hunter 303) liberally shared with his disciples but to a large extent still separating them. As revealed by various episodes of the "cinematic guessing game" (Hunter 299) affectionately referred to as "silly time" (Bennett 31), Hector's film connoisseurship is vastly superior to that of his students and his only failure to win occurs when Rudge alters the rules and performs a pop song instead:

> Timms: He doesn't know that. You can't expect him to know that. […] And anyway it's crap.
> Rudge: So is Gracie Fields. Only that's his crap. This is our crap. […]
> Akhtar: Pop is the new literacy, sir. I read it.
> Hector: In which case, I am now illiterate. But Rudge is right… his crap or my crap, it makes no difference. So, in another reference to our ancient popular culture, I say, 'Give him the money, Barney!' (Bennett 104)

In fact, for all his classical erudition and the boys' perception of his classes in terms of "breaking bread with the dead" (Bennett 37), Hector's willingness to acknowledge the relevance of another generation's cultural interests and the inclusion of genuinely student-led learning in his lessons single him out as a more modern educator than either his young rival Irwin or the considerably more charismatic Keating.

Another fundamental difference between Hector and Keating resides in the depth and scope of their textual explorations. The latter may be "depicted as being infinitely wise, playful, patient, empathic, and forgiving," (Berman 80) but his approach to literature is an essentially superficial one, whereby poems are "simply plundered for slogans to exort the students toward more personal freedom" instead of being "studied in a spirit that would lend respect to their language" (Ebert). From this point of view, the emotionally loaded tutorial in the course of which Hector and Posner briefly bond over a shared sense of "not being in the swim" (Bennett 56) entails a multifaceted analysis of Hardy's "Drummer Hodge" in which the student's grasp of the poetic text and its cultural context is enriched by means of incursions into comparative literature, lexicology, biography and above all history. Hector's incensed reaction to Irwin's casual dismissal of the wealth of cultural echoes amassed by their shared charges – "Is that what you think they are, gobbets? Handy little quotes that can be trotted out to make a point?" (Bennett 48) – further emphasises his commitment to a type of learning that transcends classroom settings and the exams obsessively invoked by his colleagues.

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What's in a Meme?

The third and last pedagogical model prompting the writing of this paper is firmly embedded in the world of real academia but based on the same belief in the inspirational and combinatory potential of existing texts shaping the fictional learning environments examined so far. Kenneth Goldsmith's 2004 project, an 'Uncreative Writing' class taught at the University of Pennsylvania, stemmed from an awareness of the extent to which the textual changes occurring "in the digital landscape as a result of intensive online engagement" were likely "to be echoed by a younger generation who had never known anything but this environment" and therefore promoted "strategies of appropriation, replication, plagiarism, piracy, sampling, plundering" (Goldsmith 201) as valid compositional methods. The still relatively unfamiliar *meme* phenomenon represented a key component of Goldsmith's course and the premise of a lucrative symbiosis in which the students selected most of the concrete material to be discussed and were in turn provided with the relevant historical, cultural or artistic information needed to contextualize the respective artefacts:

> Not only did the students take to the curriculum, but they ended up teaching me much more than I knew. Every week, they'd come into class and show me the latest language meme raging across the networks or some new remix engine that was more capable of mangling texts than I had ever dreamed of. The classroom took on the characteristics of an online community, more of a dynamic place for sharing and exchanging ideas than a traditional professor-lectures-students college course. (Goldsmith 201-202)

Recognition of the role played by contextual details in the construction, interpretation and appreciation of memes is in fact essential if one is to use them with any degree of pedagogical success in literature or cultural studies courses, as is an understanding of their *ubiquity and mnemonic potential. The realisation that Generation Z students are blissfully unaware of the 1987 cult classic The Princess Bride (to say nothing of the 1973 novel it was based on) yet capable of reciting Inigo Montoya's overly dramatic string of catchphrases can induce righteous indignation or philosophical acceptance of yet another stage in an inevitable process of cultural simplification by no means confined to dystopian scenarios:*

> Books cut shorter. Condensations, Digests. Tabloids. Everything boils down to the gag, the snap ending. […] Classics cut to fit fifteen-minute radio shows, then cut again to fill a two-minute book column, winding up at last as a ten- or twelve-line dictionary resume. […] Politics? One column, two sentences, a headline! (Bradbury 72)

An even more constructive stance would entail attempts to avail oneself of the wealth of such resources capable of bridging generational knowledge gaps and delivering linguistic and cultural information in a manageable and appealing format. To give but one such example, the infamous 'One does not simply walk into Mordor' meme has proven popular enough to spawn "a 'snowclone' version of itself: that is, a generic template derived from but more general than the original meme. In this case, 'X does not simply Y.'" (Markey Butler 230) As such, it is likely to be deeply embedded in the minds of scores of students who have never fallen under the spell of the *Lord of the Rings*, hopefully making them less prone to errors when it comes to impersonal pronouns in subject position, subject-verb agreement, adverb placement or prepositions of movement. Within the relatively loose framework of EFL classes it is naturally the caption that would take centre stage, with most of the attention oriented

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towards such aspects as its syntactic construction, lexical components or spelling. A brief interrogation of its origin, meaning and comedic implications would still be indicated in such a case, if only as a pretext for additional conversation practice.

Traceable back to Richard Dawkins' 1976 *The Selfish Gene*, the by now familiar and quite narrowly circumscribed term *meme* initially indicated "a new kind of replicator […] drifting clumsily about in its primeval soup" yet achieving evolutionary change at almost alarming rates:

> The new soup is the soup of human culture. We need a name for the new replicator, a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*. […] Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. (249)

In the same way in which some genes prove more resilient than others, ideas vary not only in their degree of truth but also in terms of "how memorable they are, how short they are, whether they activate humour, desire, fear or boredom in those exposed to them" (Tyler 147) and careful consideration of such factors helps explain why some ideas spread while others do not. Best understood as "pieces of cultural information that pass along from person to person, but gradually scale into a shared social phenomenon," memes may spread on a micro basis yet exert considerable influence on the macro level, shaping "the mindsets, forms of behavior, and actions" (Shifman 18) of various social groups. Scientists within the Darwinian-inspired field of memetics regard memes – perceived either as ideas or units of cultural heredity – as "the secret code of human behavior" (Mapua 10) and examine their effect, interaction, replication and evolution. By paying particular attention to those discursive units of digital culture which inhere some form or degree of discontent, "be it a critique of a politician, celebrity, social, cultural, or economic issue," (Wiggins 1) and implicitly indicate an ideological practice, they can potentially gain a better understanding of how religion or politics shape human culture.

Although the term is likely to invoke a viral image and catchphrase combination in the minds of most members of the public, the concept actually stands for considerably more than a basic "piece of online media that is shared and remixed over time within a community" (Mina 6).

In actual fact it comprises every single piece of cultural information transmitted from one person to another, including all the words in one's vocabulary, one's mental database of stories, skills and habits acquired from others, games and other activities one engages in: "Each of these memes has evolved in its own unique way with its own history, but each of them is using your behavior to get itself copied." (Blackmore 7) Far from being confined to the 21st-century digital landscape, they draw on a long human tradition "of remix and remaking, from street art, hip-hop, and painting" and pervade every dimension of our existence, "from the streets to the offices of our political leaders, from the Right to the Left, scribbled onto signs, stenciled on our streets, worn on our heads and posted back online." The conspicuous Internet memes of the present simply happen to represent one of the newest categories of such creative forms, "born of digital culture and in dialogue with offline life, from such daily issues as complaining about a movie or cheering on sports teams to heavier issues about social justice and human rights." (Mina 6)

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The phenomenon's rapidly escalating popularity would suggest that meme users sensed how thoroughly the concept encapsulated fundamental aspects of contemporary digital culture some time before studies explored the speed of their diffusion from person to person and highlighted their ability to both shape and reflect social mindsets:

> The term describes cultural reproduction as driven by various means of copying and imitation – practices that have become essential in contemporary digital culture. In this environment, user-driven imitation and remixing are not just prevalent practices: they have become highly valued pillars of a so-called *participatory culture*. (Shifman 4)

Cyberspace abounds in examples of "easily consumed, easily altered and repurposed, easily shared, easily discarded" (Kien 12) images, fashion trends, tunes, gifs, "videos, hashtags, slang phrases" and free software with which to edit content or add comments, occasionally rescuing such artefacts from the vortex of "virality, immediacy, and ephemerality" (Danesi 2) and allowing them to evolve over longer periods of time. In an era "driven by a hypermemetic logic, in which almost every major public event sprouts a stream of memes" (Shifman 4) and pop culture is arguably giving way to meme culture (Danesi 2), the natural tendency to participate in the spread of cultural information by means of the various mimetic strategies available (Distin 39) can be easily channelled towards one's learning objectives. By its very nature, the phenomenon launches a challenge, thus encouraging some degree of critical thinking and planning: "A meme is an invitation: 'You can do this too.'" (Mina 7) While the online tools available obviate the need for digital expertise, the process of generating a new meme requires each individual user to act as an agent of selection and combination, deciding "whom to cite and whom not, whom to talk about and whom not" and creating new instances "amongst an infinity of diversity in an infinity of combinations" (Kneis 38).

Ostensibly trivial pieces of pop culture with very little to say (Schifani 255), memes not only "play an integral part in some of the defining events of the twenty-first century" (Shifman 6) but have by now evolved so as to secure their reproduction through hermeneutic reflection:

> the modus operandi of the most viral of memes requires their audience to go beyond the surface-level meaning to appreciate hidden depths […] It is precisely in their inherent mysteriousness, the fact that memes engender a degree of detective work in order for their performative effect to be secured, that their contribution – to humour, wit, parody or politics – within the broader pool of cultural artefacts with which it competes is secured. (Maitland 1)

However basic, this unit of cultural transmission can moreover impart significantly more information than a simple text equivalent of the same message: "In the same way as emojis have been used to convey complex ideas of mood or emotion, a meme can impart a complex idea, state of mind, or shared understanding far quicker than typing and reading it in pure text form can." (Martindale 1) As such, they are eminently adaptable and can be used to fulfil a variety of pedagogical needs: introducing new topics, consolidating key concepts, delivering vital instructions of the kind that students might otherwise be tempted to gloss over, reacting to questions and contributions in playful and engaging ways.

Conclusions

The second decade of the 21st century has witnessed a number of circumspect reassessments of the link automatically drawn in past ages between consumption of high literature and the

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development of enhanced moral and social sensibilities. Rather than perpetuating this facile association, the examples featured in Karen Swallow Prior's "How Reading Makes Us More Human" reflect the manifold ways in which the various textual journeys we undertake can shape our worldview, beliefs and identity:

> From *Great Expectations* I learned the power the stories we tell ourselves have to do either harm and good, to ourselves and to others; from *Death of a Salesman* I learned the dangers of a corrupt version of the American Dream; from *Madame Bovary,* I learned to embrace the real world rather than escaping into flights of fancy; from *Gulliver's Travels* I learned the profound limitations of my own finite perspective; and from *Jane Eyre* I learned how to be myself. These weren't mere intellectual or moral lessons, although they certainly may have begun as such.

While the language learning benefits likely to stem from such a list (and extensive reading in general) in the case of native speakers and EFL students alike need no further elaboration, it could be pointed out that even the comparatively limited textual exposure afforded by meme culture should, in theory, improve one's grasp of grammar. To paraphrase Swallow Prior's lessons, a digitally native English learner – that is to say one "born into and raised in the digital world" (Palfrey and Urs 1) – might learn how to use reflexive pronouns from Eddard Stark, how to avoid double negative constructions from Ygritte, how to employ adverbs for maximum rhetorical effect from Severus Snape, how to operate subject-auxiliary inversion after negative adverbials from Gandalf, how to switch from one tense to another from Spock, how to form comparative adjectives from Princess Leia and when to omit the auxiliary verb in passive constructions from Obi-Wan Kenobi. Given the alarming frequency with which native English speakers confuse the past and past participle forms of irregular verbs, regard adjectives and adverbs as essentially interchangeable parts of speech and apparently settle *their/there/they're* dilemmas via the Russian roulette method, – to mention but some of the most conspicuous instances of the comedy of language errors constantly unfolding online – that is an encouraging thought.

In any case, a teaching methodology comprising variations on the eclectic and occasionally multimedial classroom experiments conducted by John Keating, Douglas Hector and Kenneth Goldsmith would enable language, literature and cultural studies teachers to capitalize on the common cultural background of those present and exploit the entertainment value and quotability potential of famous lines ranging from canonical poetry and fiction to film dialogues, advertising slogans, political discourses and the surreally hilarious captions accompanying the ubiquitous memes of the present. By engaging students in a dialogue scattered with recognizable and memorable phrases, this method would capture and channel their attention, encourage them to creatively contribute to their own process of learning, keep them aware of their richly diverse cultural identity and attuned to the vast resources of collective memory available to them, and above all subtly inculcate correct linguistic usage.

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