

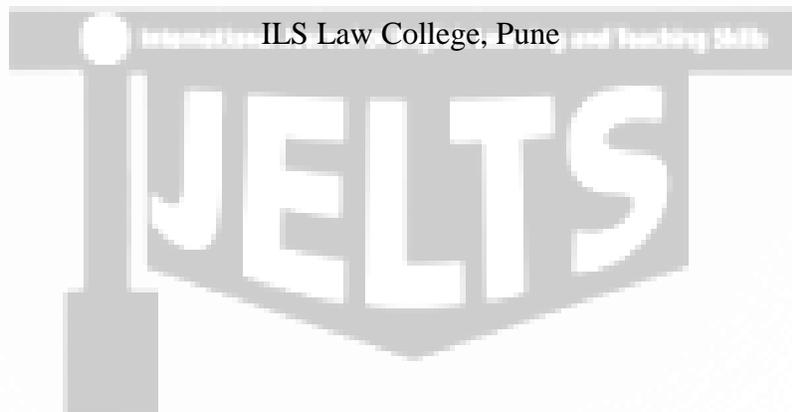
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Is Poetry Mean or does Poetry Mean? Teaching Poetry through Memes

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Abstract

Poetry is a distinct form in which meaning is expressed with special intensity as words grow and mature with every reading of the text. Poetry is at times mean when words cannot be deciphered and students get easily bogged down in ambiguous phrases; but poetry does mean when the same vague expressions are explored and explained creatively depending on the cognitive capacities of individuals. The aim of this paper is pedagogical as the study delves into the best way of introducing poetry to students. The need is to make sense of the poem without reliance on ready-made interpretation and the challenge is to make the poetry class a memorable experience. In the age of edutainment, memes can prove an important source of enabling linguistic competence through literary content. By introducing fun and pun amongst student populace, teaching poetry through memes can tap the trend into the classroom and doing a poem can become a unique experience with the help of an interactive pedagogy. To illustrate this methodology, the study will involve delineation of three poems at the levels of pre-reading, during-reading and post- reading of the texts. As an outcome, one of the major tasks will be to observe the way in which memes centrifuge poems and aid in improving spatial intelligence of the target group. This study will conclude with some suggestions on how students can become material producers in the domain of ELT. Thus, the present research is a humble attempt to showcase memes as a means to enjoy reality and celebrate differences.

Keywords: Memes, edutainment, interactive pedagogy, spatial intelligence, material production

Is Poetry Mean or does Poetry Mean? Teaching Poetry through Memes

Every language has its own rhythm and the sounds of language can be further enjoyed when they are combined into rhythmic patterns. The repetition of certain words gives pleasure to ears and it is in the form of poetry that words catch our attention not only through a grasp of their dictionary meanings but through their sensuous impression. Some perceive poetry to be more physical than intellectual whereas some consider it to be the apex of the pyramid of the mind; howsoever true it is, the fact remains that as long as there is language, there will be poetry. Poetic language is not divorced from reality; in fact, it is the essence of attentive consciousness that demands identification of metaphors as part of one's daily speech. According to Carter, "creativity is an all-pervasive feature of everyday language" (2004 i). Expression is the common thread that binds speech with thought and emotion with experience. It is because of this combination that the creative language of poetry appeals more to our senses.

The transformative power of poetry is such that recipients learn to emote better and get motivated to create. Poetry is a distinct form in which meaning is expressed with special intensity as words grow and mature with every reading of the text. This extends the realm of refined imaginary in poems and therefore, interpretation turns out to be a shared responsibility of both, the teacher and students. Often, due to the indeterminacy of meaning, poetry is accused of being full of high-sounding speech and that is why many are reluctant to teach or study this genre. Few realize that the scope of creativity in any poem is its greatest strength and not weakness. Poetry is at times mean when words cannot be deciphered and students get easily bogged down in ambiguous phrases; but poetry does mean when the same vague expressions are explored and explained

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creatively depending on the cognitive capacities of individuals. This is how poetry stimulates language development and language use. All we need is a holistic approach to the teaching of poetry in the Indian classrooms.

Unlike prose, poetry is not meant to be studied and forgotten because making poetry happen in the classroom is itself a constructive process which ideally involves an amalgamation of many activities. Something that is free-flowing and dynamic demands attention but sadly what dominates in most of the Indian classrooms is only one voice – the voice of the teacher. On the contrary, poetry is purposefully designed to create layers of meanings which can be unearthed by discussing diverse views of students. Not all voices can dominate in a class of fifty or sixty but these voices can definitely find a channel of expression if the teacher creates that space within the ambit of the classroom. In his poem entitled ‘Introduction to Poetry’, Billy Collins writes,

*I want them to waterski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the
shore.*

But all they want to do

is tie the poem to a chair with rope

and torture a confession out of it. (quoted in Aguirre, Bert n. pag.)

The poet expresses a grave concern of how students are mostly taught to dissect a poem and not enjoy it. The present study shares a similar concern and therefore, the researcher has tried to come up with an alternative way to do poetry.

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The right way to deal with the waning sense of anticipation of joy from doing poetry is through edutainment. Here, the concept of edutainment is seen with a different lens; the emphasis is more on the sense of adventure and exploration while doing poetry and less on computer application integrated with education and entertainment. Be it any software or mobile application, it must be remembered that these are just useful media that help in creating better learning environment. The aim of the present study is to promote interpretive mode of learning at various levels of the pedagogy of poetry which can further develop a culture of training students to think freely and express unhesitatingly in English language. According to Philip Rush, “Metaphors, similes and symbols can engender lively discussions about the different cultural perceptions of the writer and reader; developing the ability to recognize and interpret nuanced layers of meaning in these is a skill transferable to comprehending such nuances in other, non- poetic forms of English” (81). As a reader is a vital participant in making of the poem, the teaching-learning process of poetry must be a pleasurable experience.

A pleasurable thing, an overnight sensation and a trend that involves both fun and pun is nothing but a meme. Memes promote memorable communication and if combined with poetry, can dispel dullness and confusion from a literature classroom. In fact, teaching poetry through memes can enable linguistic competence through literary content. This is a process-oriented methodology which makes poetry look no alien; if writing poems is an art, reading poems artistically is also an art then, teaching poetry in an artistic manner is an equally significant art. It is a proven fact that the way we retain our learning is majorly through ‘learning by doing’ and collaboration. Teaching poetry through memes can provide one of the best solutions for dealing with the problems of time constraint and a large classroom. Memes can be a fruitful source to reinforce poetic themes and

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attract groups of students to work on stanzas collectively. This will in turn enhance the second language learners' vocabulary because when students are involved in doing something of their choice, they are actively using the language which is not out of compulsion but rather driven by passion.

To ensure a smooth functioning of this whole process, teachers today need multimedia training so that they can incorporate skill practice, real language use, authentic contexts, self-development, sharing, confidence and an interactive pedagogy in their classrooms. Teacher training and better infrastructure could be a challenge in this regard but this can be overcome through clear task design and ready alternatives. In this context, an interactive pedagogy should not be stretched to the extent of 'technotainment' as it has its own pros and cons; but teaching poetry through memes should be just an aid that can personalize learning by allowing students to experience and experiment poems in a unique way. It is the teacher who forms the bridge between the curriculum and students and hence, it is the teacher's responsibility to provide students opportunities to develop their skills by incorporating learning by doing. And teaching poetry through memes does provide a platform for enthusiastic student involvement. Below are three illustrations of teaching poetry through memes where the first illustration focuses on introducing memes at the pre-reading stage, the second at during-reading stage and the third at the post-reading stage of the poem.

One of the principle difficulties in approaching a poem is the fluidity of meaning; it is never fixed and this gives rise to a feeling of discomfort in the minds of both, teacher as well as students. But the aim is to sensitize students towards the arrangement of words and phrases in the text so that it can aid the creative faculty of students and motivate them to think beyond borders. Even before disclosing the title of the poem, the teacher can begin the class with the following meme:

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After having gone through this meme, students can be drawn to a discussion on their first impression about the poem; they can be asked to guess the theme and setting of the poem and write a few points on 'Time and tide wait for none', 'Time is the greatest leveler', etc. Once students have pondered on these topics, they are automatically induced to think what the poem is all about. This is where the actual text of 'Ozymandias' by P. B. Shelley can come into picture and the class can proceed with the reading of the text and discussion of phrases like 'wrinkled lip', 'sneer of cold command', and 'the hand that mocked them' as projected in the given meme.

Widdowson points out that it is a common practice in literature courses for a teacher to tell students what to see, and how to feel about a given work, denying them any opportunity to experience it for themselves. Widdowson opposes this kind of passive, single channel academic spoon feeding that removes students from direct, active participation in discovering "the way

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language is used in literary discourse for the conveying of unique messages” (76). While teaching the poem ‘The World Is Too Much With Us’ by William Wordsworth, the teacher can curate a meme for every single section of the sonnet. After introducing the title, the memes given below can be used to trigger the imagination of students:



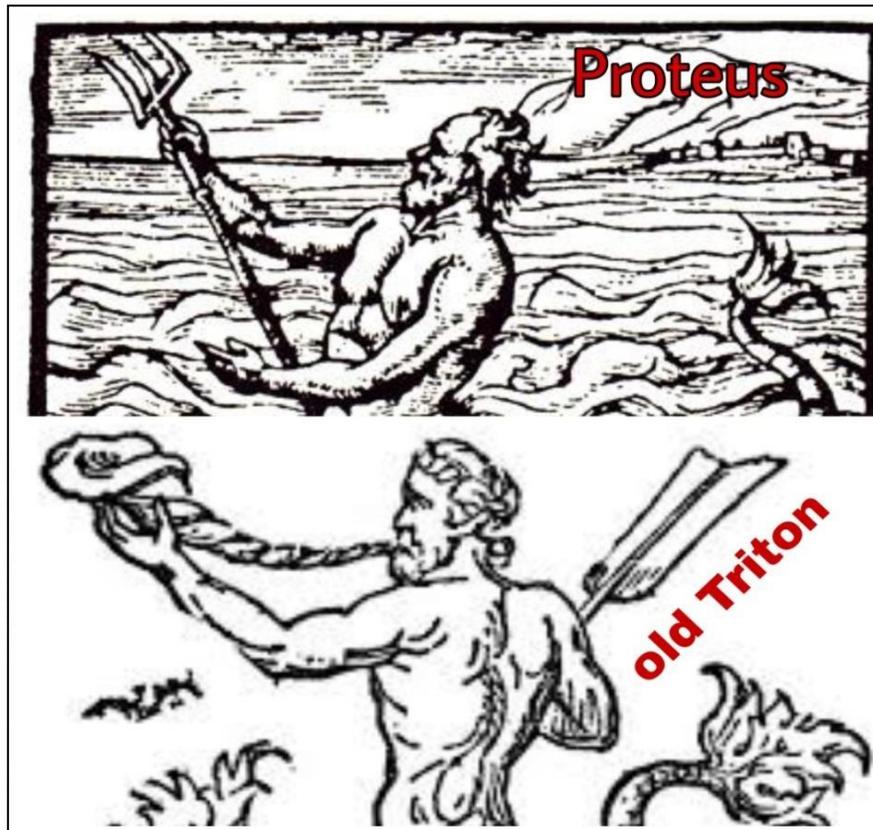
Once the students have discussed the conflict and the mounting pressure along the lines of the title, for lines 1-4, 5-8 and 9-14, the following memes can be used respectively to highlight the tussle cropping in the mind of the poet:

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These memes can be displayed simultaneously while reciting the lines of the text which can be in sync with the two quatrains and a sestet. Once the textual language and the subject matter of the meme are in harmony, students can actually use notable instances of the language that they have studied in the poem. Memes do provoke students to say something; the way it is designed depends on the imaginative involvement of the speaker and the way it is perceived depends on the imaginative involvement of the listener. Therefore, poetic pieces or selective chunks of any literary text can be best ingrained through memes.

As far as the post-reading stage of the poem is concerned, it is mostly observed that nothing substantial happens beyond discussing the vocabulary and comprehension questions related to the text. This causes boredom and if every poem is dealt in the same way, then it also results in

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monotony. After all, the text is merely the stimulus, but to make students respond to the same stimulus in an appealing manner, memes can become a catalyst by building an involving context where learners can interact with the text and readily substantiate their responses. After teaching the poem ‘Invictus’ by W. E. Henley, the following two memes can be used:





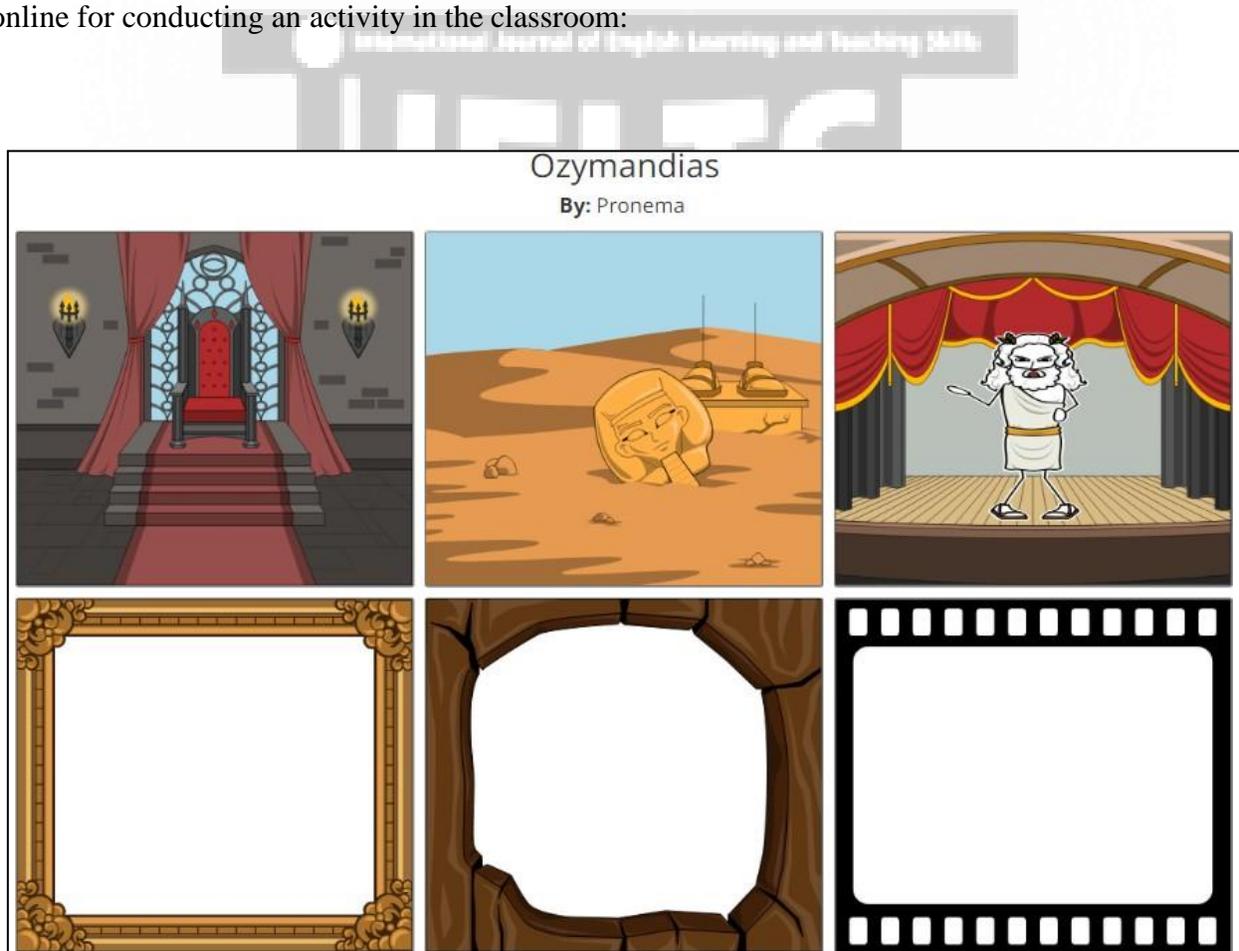
Just reading out the poem and asking students to answer what they feel about the poem creates an atmosphere of killing silence where they do not usually know what to say and how to answer in addition to the fear of misinterpretation. The characters for these memes have been deliberately selected as they capture the essence of the poem in a better way and they belong to the Avengers franchise which is quite a rage among the teens as well as tweens. Even the catch- phrases that appear as captions are picked up directly from the poetic text to suit the personalities of these heroes. This can prove to be an instant hit with the target group and also aptly justify the title ‘Invictus’ – like the invincible avengers, the poem too revolves around an indomitable soul. This kind of equation is more relatable and students can retain this explanation forever.

Thus, memes are the best way to introduce, understand and discuss poetry with the classes as well

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as the masses. Memes centrifuge poems; while trying to decode memes, there is greater scope for improvisation because meaning streams out in different directions from the poem and this erects a connection between the text and students. As the target group is busy deciphering meaning from the image-text combination, the process assists in improving visual/spatial intelligence of students as memes provide a great impetus to the visual faculty of learners. Even while transferring poetry into a narrative form and creating a story-board out of the poem, the idea of space gets profound amongst the learners. Below is an example of a story-board related to ‘Ozymandias’ created online for conducting an activity in the classroom:



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The space provided in the three frames below every picture is supposed to be filled with a tagline related to the character after doing the poem in the class. This kind of activity can also be given as homework where students can choose between verbal and visual output that has to appear within each frame. This is simply an extension activity that can be carried out either through a PowerPoint Presentation or through a chart paper; and if it is homework, then students can also have the liberty to complete it in their mobile phone applications. This will not destroy the beauty of the poem; rather, assist the poem to shine in a new light of exquisiteness. Poetry is that site of contestation where the best words battle to find the most suitable space. Therefore, while teaching and learning poetry, it is essential to turn the black and white poetic lines into colourful cues that can appeal to the senses and contribute in better comprehensibility.

It is here that students can turn into material producers. The class can be divided into groups of four or five and each group can be asked to create a meme, either for every stanza or for every poem depending on the demand of the syllabus. The teacher has to only monitor the language but the content can be created by the tech-savvy students who would willingly ideate and produce memes that will leave an indelible mark of the poem on their minds. This can be counted as a genuine example of a student-centric classroom where students are not just interpreting the poem but are also contributing in developing teaching aids that will give them a hands-on experience of the text. Teaching and learning is a two-way process where both teacher and the students have to equally partake. Once memes are created by the students, punch-lines can be picked up directly from the poem that will not only aid the memory but also minister creativity. By providing students with a vehicle for participating in the process of meme creation, opportunities are made available for enhanced literary appreciation and fresh self-conceptions. It is in this capacity that

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memes are democratic – of the students, by the students and for the students.

Thus, memes become a stimulus to a creative act by discouraging students to rely on ready-made interpretation and inspiring them to construe a number of possible senses out of the given frame of words in a poem. With the help of a meme, the poem surrenders its meanness and becomes meaningful to every student in a unique manner. In this way, memes are a means to enjoy reality and celebrate differences.



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