

“Meme, Myth, and Micro-Text: The Circulation of Literary Archetypes in Digital Culture”

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Abstract

This paper examines how canonical literary figures and archetypes are reimagined within contemporary internet meme culture, focusing on popular meme adaptations of works by Franz Kafka, William Shakespeare, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Sylvia Plath, and other widely recognized literary texts. Challenging the assumption that memes trivialize literature, the study argues that they function as participatory micro-critical forms that translate complex literary themes such as existential anxiety, indecision, desire, alienation, and absurdity into concise visual-verbal micro-texts. Drawing on theories of remediation, participatory culture, digital intertextuality, and archetypal criticism, the paper analyses recurring meme practices such as Kafka’s “bug in the bed” meme representing modern burnout and social withdrawal, Hamlet memes that reduce philosophical paralysis to everyday indecision, The Great Gatsby memes that satirize obsession and unfulfilled desire, and Plath-related memes representing mental anguish and poetic identity. While this process inevitably flattens historical and textual nuance, it simultaneously renews the relevance of literary archetypes by embedding them within everyday digital communication. The paper ultimately argues that literary memes operate as a form of contemporary digital folklore where meaning is collectively produced through circulation and remix, revealing a significant shift in how literary texts are received, remembered, and reimagined in the digital age.

Keywords: Literary memes, Internet meme culture, Digital folklore, Participatory culture, Remediation, Digital intertextuality, Literary archetypes, Canonical literature, Micro-criticism, Visual-verbal micro-texts, Reception studies.

Introduction

The rapid expansion of internet meme culture has transformed contemporary modes of communication, textual engagement, and cultural memory. Memes—typically consisting of images combined with brief captions—circulate rapidly across digital platforms and function as shared cultural references shaped by repetition, remixing, and reinterpretation. Although memes are frequently perceived as trivial or humorous content, many of them draw directly upon canonical literary texts and characters. Figures and archetypes derived from writers such as Franz Kafka, William Shakespeare, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Sylvia Plath regularly appear in meme culture, demonstrating that literary works continue to exert cultural influence even within highly compressed digital forms. Rather than trivializing literature, memes reinterpret canonical works by transforming complex narratives into interactive micro-texts that render literary themes accessible to contemporary audiences. This process demonstrates how literature adapts to changing media environments and continues to circulate within popular culture beyond traditional academic contexts.

Remediation and Digital Adaptation of Literary Texts

The concept of remediation provides an important theoretical framework for understanding how literature appears within meme culture. According to Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, new media do not completely replace earlier media forms but rather refashion and reinterpret them within new technological contexts (Bolter and Grusin). Internet memes therefore remediate literature by translating dense narratives, philosophical ideas, and symbolic structures into visual-verbal units suited for rapid digital circulation. In this process, literary texts are experienced not through extended reading alone but also through brief references that depend on cultural familiarity. The meaning of the literary work is not eliminated but condensed into symbolic fragments that circulate across social media platforms. This transformation changes the conditions under which literature is interpreted and shared.

Inter textuality and the Meme as Micro-Text

Roland Barthes' concept of textual plurality further clarifies the dynamics of meme culture. Barthes argues that a text should be understood as “a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture,” emphasizing that meaning emerges through networks of cultural references rather than through a single authorial intention. Memes embody this principle by blending literary references with popular culture, internet slang, and contemporary experiences. Within meme culture, literary works function as “writerly texts” that invite reinterpretation and remixing

rather than passive consumption. Users creatively adapt canonical texts into new humorous or critical contexts. The meaning of literary memes therefore emerges through circulation and collective engagement rather than through strict fidelity to the original work.

Participatory Culture and Collective Interpretation

Henry Jenkins' theory of participatory culture provides another useful framework for analysing literary memes. Jenkins describes participatory culture as a cultural environment in which audiences are active contributors who produce and share media content rather than merely consuming it. In this environment, individuals feel that their contributions matter and that they participate in shared cultural conversations. Literary memes exemplify what Jenkins describes as "textual poaching," where audiences appropriate existing cultural texts and reinterpret them according to their own experiences and perspectives. When internet users transform Hamlet into a meme about procrastination or reinterpret Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* as a joke about burnout, they are engaging in informal literary interpretation. These memes function as micro-critical acts that condense complex literary ideas into instantly recognizable symbolic forms.

Kafka and the Meme of Existential Burnout

Franz Kafka's works—particularly *The Metamorphosis*—occupy a prominent place in meme culture. Memes often depict characters lying in bed with captions suggesting exhaustion or social withdrawal, accompanied by references to Kafka's writing. These memes connect Gregor Samsa's transformation into an insect with contemporary experiences of burnout, alienation, and emotional fatigue. Albert Camus describes Kafka's literary universe as one in which "the absurd is felt as a permanent tension." Meme culture translates this philosophical abstraction into everyday emotional experiences, making Kafka's themes immediately relatable to digital audiences. From an archetypal perspective, Gregor Samsa represents the figure of the alienated individual burdened by social expectations. Carl Jung defines archetypes as recurring symbolic forms that appear across cultures and historical periods. Kafka memes therefore illustrate how literary archetypes persist within the collective unconscious while adapting to new cultural environments.

Hamlet and the Meme of Indecision

William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has also become a frequent subject of meme culture, particularly in relation to the theme of indecision. In many memes, Hamlet is

depicted as struggling with trivial everyday choices, such as deciding what to eat or whether to reply to a message. These humorous reinterpretations transform philosophical paralysis into relatable everyday dilemmas. T. S. Eliot famously described *Hamlet* as an “artistic failure” because of its complex emotional ambiguity. Meme culture simplifies this complexity by highlighting Hamlet’s indecision as the play’s most recognizable feature. Despite this simplification, the memes preserve the central archetype of the reflective and conflicted individual. Northrop Frye’s theory of archetypal criticism helps explain why Hamlet remains culturally recognizable. Frye argues that literature is structured around recurring mythic patterns that remain meaningful across historical contexts. Hamlet’s indecision functions as one such archetype, making it adaptable to contemporary humorous reinterpretations.

Gatsby Memes and the Satire of Desire

F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* frequently appears in meme culture as a symbol of obsession, illusion, and unattainable dreams. Images of Gatsby raising a glass or gazing across the bay are often paired with captions highlighting the futility of romantic or material aspirations. From the perspective of archetypal criticism, Gatsby represents the romantic dreamer driven by illusion rather than reality. Meme culture amplifies Fitzgerald’s critique of the American Dream by juxtaposing Gatsby’s grand aspirations with mundane contemporary disappointments. Roland Barthes’ concept of myth is also useful here. Barthes argues that myth transforms historical ideas into seemingly natural truths. Gatsby memes disrupt these myths by exposing the superficial nature of idealized dreams and capitalist ambition.

Sylvia Plath Memes and Digital Confession

Memes referencing Sylvia Plath often draw upon her confessional poetry and public persona to express emotional vulnerability and psychological anguish. References to poems from *Ariel* or to Plath’s personal struggles appear frequently within online meme culture. Julia Kristeva’s theory of intertextuality helps explain how these memes operate. According to Kristeva, texts exist within networks of cultural dialogue rather than as isolated works. Plath memes extend this dialogue by connecting confessional poetry with contemporary discussions of mental health and emotional expression. Although such memes risk oversimplifying complex emotional experiences, they also create spaces where individuals collectively acknowledge vulnerability and artistic identity.

Memes as Digital Folklore

Memes share several characteristics with traditional folklore. Like myths and folktales, memes circulate anonymously, evolve through repetition, and change through collective reinterpretation. Claude Lévi-Strauss argues that myths derive meaning from patterns of repetition and transformation rather than from a single origin. Similarly, literary memes transform canonical texts into widely recognizable cultural symbols that reflect contemporary concerns. In this sense, meme culture functions as a form of digital folklore where meaning is collaboratively produced through circulation and remixing.

Conclusion

Literary memes demonstrate how canonical literature continues to circulate within contemporary digital culture. Drawing upon theories of remediation, participatory culture, intertextuality, and archetypal criticism, this study has shown how figures such as Kafka, Hamlet, Gatsby, and Sylvia Plath persist within meme culture as symbolic representations of enduring human experiences. Although memes inevitably simplify and decontextualize literary texts, they also renew the relevance of literary archetypes by embedding them within everyday digital communication. As a form of digital folklore, literary memes illustrate a transformation in literary reception, where meaning emerges through collective reinterpretation and circulation rather than through traditional academic reading practices.

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