Exploring the Intersection of Memes, Literature, and Ethics in Teaching. A Case-Study

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Abstract

This study delves into the integration of internet memes into academic settings, particularly within literature courses and ethics classes, aiming to analyze their cultural significance and pedagogical potential. Drawing upon a survey administered to undergraduate students enrolled in Romanian-English programs, this research investigates the impact of memes on the study of canonical authors in literature courses and the analysis of behaviors in ethics classes. Employing both sentiment analysis and content analysis, the paper explores potential categorizations of memes ([1]; [2]; [3]), considering their societal impact and their ability to simplify complex concepts [4] while promoting critical thinking skills ([4]; [5]). Additionally, it discusses memes as a distinct genre [6] and their role as a "fundamental unit of cultural transmission" [7].

Keywords: *Internet memes, literature, ethics, critical thinking, humour, teaching*

1. Introduction: Memes – Remixing Culture

In the last decade, the educational landscape has increasingly incorporated unconventional, multimodal cultural and informational "vehicles", such as GIFs, memes, short videos etc. As "fundamental units of cultural transmission" [7], memes are often involved in learning practices, stimulating student engagement and retention, by providing contextually rich and memorable content. The visual foundation of a meme is represented by an "old" reference or background, which is then linked to a new context, interpretation, or text. This "cultural remix", derived from the term coined by Richard Dawkins in 1976 (*The Selfish Gene* [8]), is based on both an "artistic response" [5] and a simplification, involving multimodality, parody, and mockery. It seems that memes are often dismissed as lacking cultural significance. However, given their significant impact on viewers, it is essential that we engage with them and discuss their potential relevance in the educational field. Given the "meme's simplicity in form" that "can make it more accessible to students than a traditional essay or composition" [5], this cultural unit transforms the viewer into an active member of a participatory culture, rather than a mere consumer. Moreover, a meme can "contain many references and require an impressive amount of knowledge in order to be understood. They contain references from the popular culture, political and religious references, references specific to a region or a country and references to do with certain profession or field." [4]. The transformative power of a meme lies in its ability to be recontextualised. By overlaying new text or placing the image in a different context, the creator shifts the meaning, often to produce humour, satire, or social commentary. This reinterpretation exploits the audience's familiarity with the original reference to create a surprising or insightful juxtaposition. The combination of the old visual reference with the new context or interpretation results in a remix – in literary terms, a meme is indeed deeply intertextual, by presenting a new creation that both playfully reconfigures and subverts its original components. This remixing process is central to what makes memes so engaging and versatile. It allows for infinite variations and reinterpretations, each resonating with different audiences or commenting on different aspects of contemporary life. Memes thrive on this adaptability, constantly evolving as they are shared, adapted and re-shared across social media platforms.

2. Survey – Students' Perception about Memes

In order to gather insights directly from people exposed to memes in educational contexts, we conducted a survey among first-year BA students (most of them studying Romanian and/or English) in 2022 and 2024. The survey asked whether professors had used memes in university teaching, which disciplines employed them, and what effects or roles they had observed. In total, 284 responses were collected. The distribution of these responses was as follows: 154 responses were collected in 2022, while the remaining responses (130) were collected in 2024. This distribution allows for a comparative

analysis between the two years. 74,7% percent of the 2024 responses and 43,1% of the 2022 responses indicated that memes were indeed used in their university courses (Fig. 1).
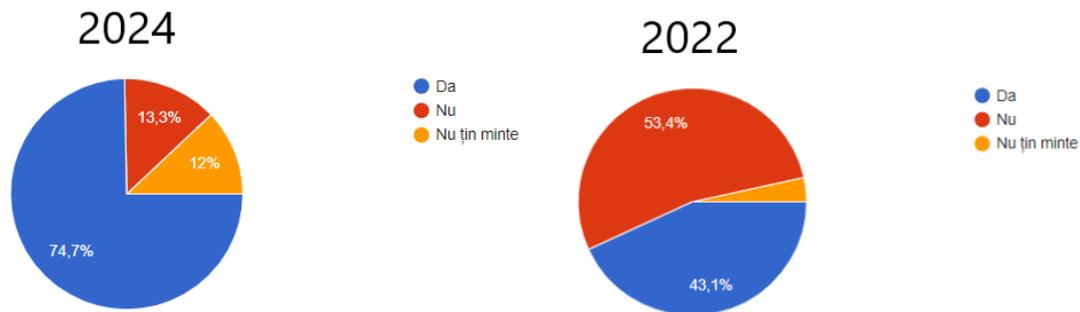

Fig. 1 - Use of memes in university classes (2024 vs 2022)

The data shows a notable increase in the use of memes in university courses over the period of the study. This significant rise suggests a growing acceptance and integration of memes within the academic environment. Among the disciplines mentioned, students referred to language courses, such as practical English courses (27%), literature courses (13%), courses from the teaching department (7%), and as well as ethics and academic writing (74%) or practice stages (7%) (see Fig. 2).
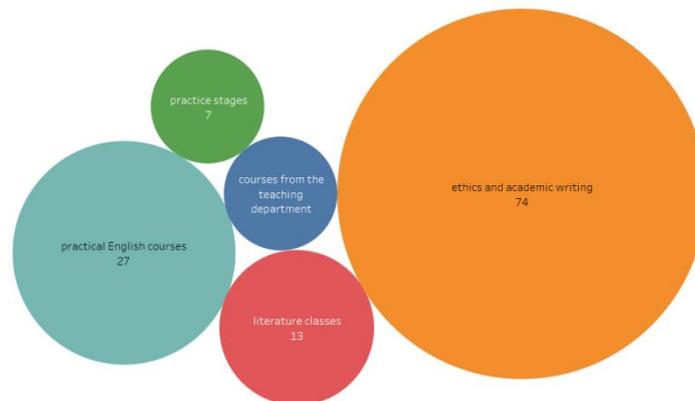

Fig. 2 - Disciplines where memes were used

Students reported that the images were amusing and captured their attention, they found that memes helped them gain a better understanding of theoretical concepts and, perhaps unintentionally, helped them to retain certain aspects of the material, as shown in their responses about the role of memes: "Amusement", "Get our attention", "Better understanding of the theoretical aspects", "made me unwittingly keep in mind certain aspects".

Students have access to memes on various social media platforms such as Instagram (124 occurrences), Facebook (86 occurrences), Twitter (10), Tumblr (2), TikTok (10), 4chan (2), 9gag (2), Reddit (10), and even educational platforms such as Google Classroom (2). As a "replicator", a meme needs the chain, the "social transmission" – and the digital environment is best suited for this purpose. When asked about the general role of a meme, students mentioned that they primarily serve to amuse their audience, often using satire and irony to make jokes about situations, people, or societal phenomena (see Fig. 3). This humorous approach can sometimes be problematic, particularly when it involves making fun of sensitive issues or individuals, raising ethical concerns about the nature of such humour. In addition, memes help to preserve "memorable" moments, by capturing events or trends in a form that is easily shareable and recognisable. Their ability to be "relatable" makes them a powerful tool for expressing shared experiences or feelings, enhancing a sense of community among those who share similar perspectives. Despite their humorous nature, memes often present information that is "more or less close to factual", as they can also oversimplify complex issues and spread misinformation. Students acknowledge that memes offer "knowledge and understanding through humor" and rely on brevity and visual impact, but this means that they often reduce nuanced topics to more entertaining patterns. This simplification can lead to misinterpretations or incomplete understandings of important issues. In this case, the audience may take the meme's message as a

complete representation of reality, which can contribute to the spread of misconceptions, oversimplification etc.

In summary, students mentioned that memes, when used in the classroom, memes enhance the interactivity of a lecture or seminar without compromising the informative content. However, students have noted that for memes to be effective, they must be "trendy" and the audience must understand the reference. Otherwise, the meme fails to serve its purpose and becomes ineffective.

Fig. 3 - Wordcloud based on students' answers regarding platforms with memes and memes' roles

3. Memes and Literature – Towards a "Memeology"?

In the context of teaching Romanian literature, memes can serve as a mean to engage students with literary texts, authors, and themes. The online environment has several examples of pages which promote or post literary memes, such as meme.literare (Instagram), Junimea (Facebook),

We provided the students with ten memes: five related to Romanian literary works/canonical authors and five related to British or American literature. We then asked them to explain the effect of each meme or the reference it made.

The first meme (Fig. 4) contrasts two literary figures: George Călinescu, a prominent Romanian interwar novelist known for his work *Enigma Otiliei* (Eng.: *Otilia's Mystery*), and Honoré de Balzac, a renowned French writer known for his extensive series *La Comédie humaine*. The image critically juxtaposes George Călinescu with Honoré de Balzac to comment on Călinescu's "literary abilities" and his attempts to emulate a master novelist. When commenting the meme, students mentioned the "inability, lack of talent to imitate", "a childish copy" (suggesting a criticism of

Fig. 4 - Călinescu and Balzac (source)

Călinescu's work as being a poor imitation of Balzac's style), "misunderstanding" (it is not very clear whether the comment implies that Călinescu misunderstood Balzac or the misunderstanding can appear on the reader's side), "irony" (pointing out that Călinescu's attempt to emulate Balzac fails) and "The difference between what we see and what we understand or reproduce". In several more detailed answers, students point out that Călinescu draws on Balzac's repertoire of characters and themes, emphasising the role of literary models in the wider circulation of literature in a cross-cultural exchange.

The next two memes focus on another inter-war literary figure, Camil Petrescu and comment on literary models and influences, as well as literary theory. Here, the humour lies in the perceived struggle of Petrescu to match the literary achievements of Proust and Gide (Fig. 5). Students alluded to cultural hierarchies: "I think this amusing meme makes a fine allusion to the fact that the author Camil Petrescu is trying to be on the same cultural «tree branch» as Proust and Gide."; "We have Proust, Gide… and Petrescu is struggling there…"; "C'mon, he's not THAT bad:))))". The image shows

the dynamics of literary influence and cultural hierarchies, illustrating how writers like Camil Petrescu aspire to be part of a wider literary tradition, drawing inspiration from and being compared to more prominent figures like Marcel Proust and André Gide. The third meme (Fig. 6), also associated with Petrescu's work, relates to his theoretical observations about the modern novel or theatre. In practice, Petrescu's novels, such as *Ultima noapte de dragoste, întâia noapte de război* (Eng.: *The Last Night of Love, the First Night of War*) and *Patul lui Procust* (Eng.: *The Bed of Procrustes*), embody his theoretical principles to varying degrees. This meme, however, mocks the way in which a meticulous vision is translated into the actual narrative.
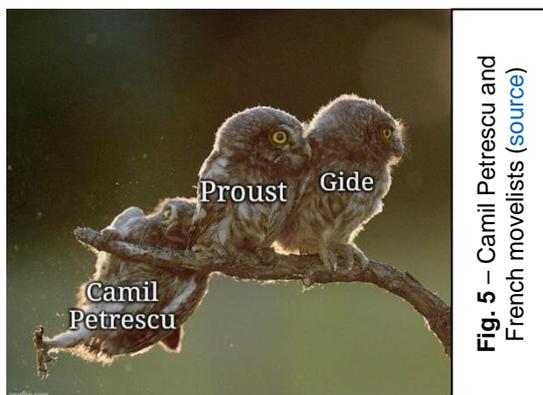
Fig. 5 – Camil Petrescu and French novelists (source)
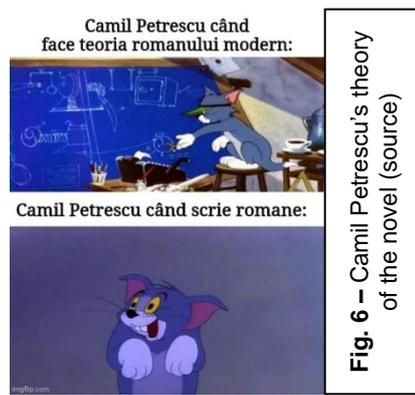
Fig. 6 – Camil Petrescu's theory of the novel (source)

The previous memes problematise the use of literary models and theories in the context of Romanian literature and a subject of "cultural morphology" in the sense that they assume that there is a certain cultural gap between Romanian and other European literatures. The students are familiar with an ongoing debate about the Romanian culture as a "minor culture", based on "imitation", which needs models in order to develop. However, the images also recycle several stereotypes that are usually found in the introductory paragraphs of essays written at pre-university level. In this case, the humorous aspect is actually linked to an oversimplification that is based on reinforced clichés, while criticising the fact that students do not engage in an in-depth analysis, exploring the nuances and complexities of literary works. In this context, professors should encourage students to question the simplified narratives they encounter and to develop their critical thinking ([4]; [5]). These memes are a good pretext for an in-depth comparative analysis in literary studies classes.

The fourth meme analysed is based on a language game linked to a novel written by Mircea Eliade, *Maitreyi* (Fig. 7). The pronunciation of the character's name is similar to the date of May 3rd ("OMG, I forgot to use it on May, 3rd"), and surprisingly students considered the meme to be overused: "Terrible. Overused. Don't".

If this image was too familiar to students, the last meme analysed was, on the contrary, more difficult to deal with. Fig. 8 features Marcel Ciolacu, the leader of the Social-Democratic Party and now the Romanian Prime-Minister. The meme captures a specific moment from an interview in which an amount of cash can be seen in Ciolacu's inside pocket. The figure is associated with the character Leonida Pascalopol, from George Călinescu's novel *Enigma Otiliei*, where he embodies the archetype of the wealthy nobleman. Students from the 2022 cohort and most of the 2024 cohort did not recognise the political figure and failed to identify his role: "I think it's a niche meme; I don't know the politician in question."; "Very clever association, yet subtle"; "Money. Wealth. Sugar Daddy."; "Money in power! Maximum irony". Since less than 25% of the students were familiar with the meaning and the political reference, we can discuss a possible lack of political awareness and civic engagement: students are disconnected to the political sphere, they lack interest or trust in political institutions, which remains a challenge for the "health" of democracy.

Fig. 7 – Eliade and Maitreyi (source)

While the

Fig. 8 - Călinescu and Politics (source)

students recognised the fictional characters and names from the Romanian literature, some of them had difficulties with those derived from English language literature. Edgar Allan Poe's image (Fig. 9) was classified as "gold", because it captures the fact that his works have a chilling effect, using techniques of suspense and horror ("This is no joke."). Moreover, students commented on the author's appearance (which is in line with the themes of his literary works, associated with "dark Romanticism"). The meme combining the image from *The Lord of the Rings* and a reference to Shakespeare (Fig. 10) was considered "relatable", as students were familiar with both works: they emphasised the difficulties of interpreting Shakespeare's literature – "It refers to the fact that Shakespeare's plays have many facets and depending on how you read them new interpretations can emerge, it's a famous meme from LOTR.". The next meme layers the Irish writer, Oscar Wilde, and the iconic rock song *Born to be Wild*, by Steppenwolf (Fig. 11). The fusion is based on puns and word similarities, but few students recognised the song (23%) – while it remains a classic for certain generations, younger students seem to be less familiar with rock history. Furthermore, the image of Wilde was not immediately identified by everyone. In fact, three comments introduce another layer of interpretation, drawing a parallel with Lana del Rey's 2012 song *Born to Die.* This example shows how cultural references can be unintentionally layered to reframe old ones.
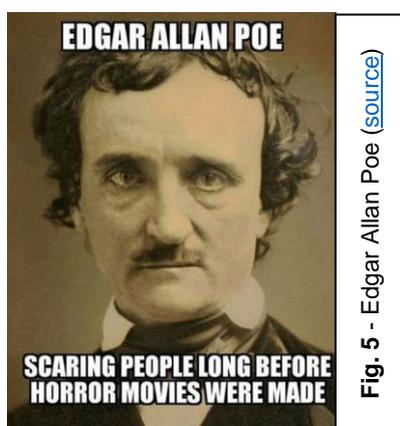

Fig. 5 - Edgar Allan Poe (source)
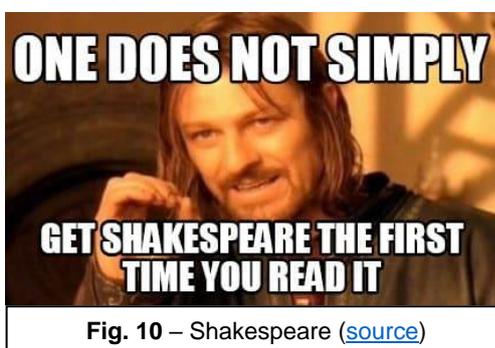
Fig. 10 – Shakespeare (source)

Fig. 11 - Oscar Wilde (source)

The last two memes included in our survey relate to the reader's relationship with the text. In the case of James Joyce (Fig. 12), the image explains the challenges of reading his works: the task of reading Ulysses almost "killed" the reader, so tackling *Finnegan's Wake* will be even more difficult, especially because of its complex and multilingual narrative or unconventional language structure. The irony is perhaps accompanied by frustration in the comments of one of our students: "Not funny, not funny at all.". But students who aren't studying English as a minor didn't get the reference. The last meme combines another classic author, Charles Dickens, with a reference from popular culture – Dwight Schrute from *The Office* (Fig. 13). Apparently, students echoed this feeling of disappointment after reading Dickens: "Aaah, here he is referencing Dickens' novel *Great Expectations* and as many try to read Dickens, they come with some high expectations but are left disappointed, I suppose because of all the pesky details."; "*Great Expectations* wasn't very great.".


Fig. 12 - James Joyce (source)
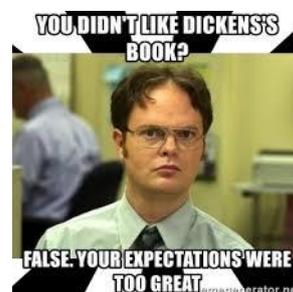
Fig. 13 - Charles Dickens (source)

Literary memes therefore represent an unconventional teaching tool, blending humour with knowledge. There were several types of literary memes used in our survey: (1) author-focused – based on the process of writing or the author's personality, they often highlight well-known literary figures and their distinctive features (e.g. those related to Petrescu, Călinescu, Poe, Eliade, Wilde); (2) reader-focused – based on the process of understanding the work, or memes that target the reader's

experience, particularly the challenges of understanding certain works (e.g. in the case of Shakespeare, Joyce, Dickens); (3) character-focused (from the narrative) – with possible comparisons (with public figures) (e.g. Leonida Pascalopol vs Marcel Ciolacu). Many literary memes rely on intertextual references, where understanding the humour requires knowledge of seveal texts, cultural artefacts, or even political, social contexts. Due to several common characteristics (employing humour, intertextuality, embedding communicative functions), memes could be considered as a distinct "genre" in the teaching of literature, as proposed by Wiggins and Bowers [6], since these instruments can bridge a certain gap between canonical literature and (post)modern or contemporary means of reading.

4. Memes and Ethics – Intersections

Another example of the use of memes in educational contexts, also for first year BA students, is the inclusion of memes related to topics such as university life, ethics, and plagiarism in the *Ethics, Integrity and Academic Writing* course. In this way, students can easily engage in debates about ethical issues, without having to deal with more difficult conceptual frameworks or with abstract definitions. During a seminar, students were divided into smaller groups of 4-5 and asked to search online for a meme related to the course content. Students were asked to examine the ethical implications of the situation described in the meme and to indicate whether or not the image was problematic (denigrating, discriminatory, politically incorrect etc.). A total of 45 memes were analysed, but the typology of the images selected by the students was very diverse. The students were asked to analyse the memes according to the following criteria:

- According to their basic reference (there was great variety, ranging from those related to cultural dimensions – music, movies, literature, games, language, etc. – to those related to science, daily life, etc.);
- According to figures/personalities selected (there were people from different fields);
- According to topics (the variation was not significant, most of them related directly to ethics, university, family, relationships, politics, language learning, etc.);
- According to emotions (keeping in mind a sentiment classification, especially used by Smitha, Sendhilkumar, Mahalaksmi [1]);
- According to visual aspects/composition;
- According to humour types (see [2]).

There is whole body of research in visual-linguistic models for automatic meme classification, which is mostly used in order to help reduce discrimination and the spread of hate speech on the internet [9], with a complicated architecture of pre-processing stages, a linguistic stage and a visual stage, where at the end the computer makes a decision whether the meme is hateful/harmful or not hateful/not harmful (see also [2] for a typology of harmful Internet memes). Most of the images were innocent and amusing, but for a few images students failed to identify all possible issues – for instance, many memes that showing students with learning difficulties are with black people, so issues such as racism, other forms of discrimination, identity construction are neglected. Students also found it difficult to draw firm boundaries between humour, mockery and denigration. The exercise thus helped students to develop their analytical skills and ethical reasoning skills, while engaging in debates about contemporary moral issues and ethical decision-making (see Fig. 14 for some of the memes discussed in class).
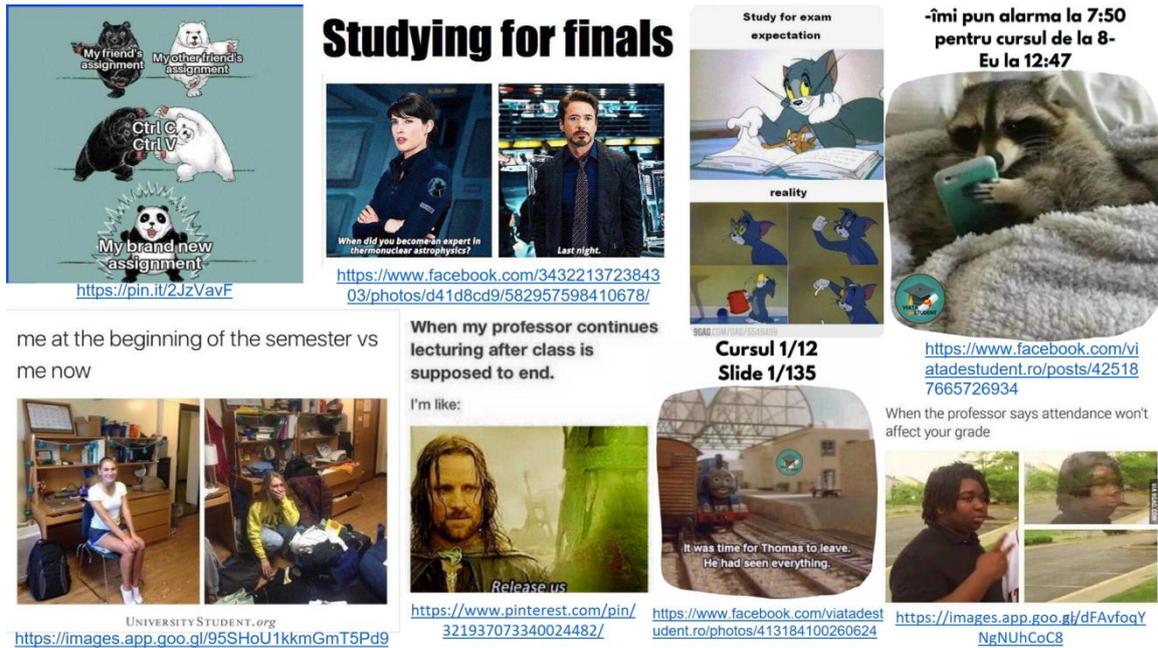
Fig. 6 - Memes analysed during Ethics classes

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Our study demonstrates the pedagogical potential of integrating internet memes into literature and ethics courses. In literature courses, memes serve as a bridge between the traditional study of the canon and contemporary student experiences, making the works more relatable and accessible. However, this approach needs to be accompanied by contextual explanations [5] to avoid oversimplification of literary themes. In ethics classes, brief analyses employed by students, taking into account both context (ideologies, themes, and ideas incorporated) and form analysis (setting) (see [10]), contribute to reflection on one's own knowledge and raise awareness of different aspects (from theoretical or conceptual framework with which several disciplines operate, to societal issues). Moreover, the use of memes in this context promotes critical thinking and ethical reasoning by encouraging students to reflect on the implications or facets of the humour and the underlying messages conveyed. The results of the survey of undergraduate students in Romanian-English programmes indicate a positive reception towards the use of memes in both literature and ethics courses. However, they underlined the importance of background knowledge in order to fully understand a meme. Thus, this research highlights the importance of innovative teaching methods that resonate with contemporary student experiences and the need to incorporate participatory tools for students.

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