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The Power of Parody and Satire in the 21st Century English Classroom

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Abstract

A frequent question in today's high school English classroom is how "the classics" fit into our 21st century curriculum. Students ask, "How is this relevant to me?" and complain that the literature they are reading in class is outdated and difficult to understand. Therefore, my project embraces a few canonical texts that are most frequently used in America's schools and presents them in an innovative way that students will not only understand, but engage on a critical level. Based on emerging research in the education field, my project explains how modern technology and the techniques of parody and satire can be used in combination with one another to make literature come alive. For example, texts such as Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman,* Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet,* and Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* can be spun from new and even humorous perspectives. Models for three class projects involving these texts are described and linked, including a YouTube parody video, a digital modern adaptation poster, and a Twitter account featuring a character from a novel. By creating these projects myself, I am presenting ways that students can access literature right where they are, yet pushing them to think critically and creatively about important themes found in works that continue to stand the test of time.

     Keywords: parody, satire, education, technology

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Literature earns the title "classic" due to its famous authors, universal themes, and didactic quality in the English classroom. However, "Classic– a book which people praise and don't read" seems to be a more fitting statement now in the 21st century than when Mark Twain originally said it. People simultaneously praise books like *Heart of Darkness* and *Moby Dick* as iconic works of fiction, yet those same works are inextricably tied to the groans of middle-aged people reminiscing about their English class experiences and how they "hated the stories" or "could never understand what was going on" in them. Those negative feelings about classic literature pose a real problem even more now for the 21st century English classroom. Educators and high school students alike know that Shakespeare and Steinbeck will appear on their reading lists; however, the response to reading these works is usually less than enthusiastic. One current high school senior and Honors student Isaac O'Brien says, "I appreciate the fact that they are classics and it is always beneficial to know what certain allusions stem from. Apart from that, I prefer to not read them or read in general. They are generally lengthy, archaic, and difficult to understand in the modern era" (personal communication, March 16, 2014). Unfortunately, O'Brien is not the only one who feels this way. Scholars and teachers alike are finding that 21st century technology, media, and everything else going on in young people's lives often serve as distractions toward traditional modes of learning. Steven Goodman (2003) observes:

> Most adults are aware of the degree to which today's young people...are enmeshed in a visual and oral media culture rather than the print-based culture long associated with literacy. Few, though, have confronted the degree to which this change has created a language gap...a disconnect between the experiences of the young and the print culture prevailing in high schools. (p. ix)

An important question that stems from acknowledging this disconnect is whether we should even teach the classics at all. Teacher Carol Jago (2004) explains the gap between canonical forms of literature and the students who study them becomes wider as students and instructors put in less effort. However, this "work of heroes, of champions," is becoming increasingly necessary. If a teacher takes the time to teach classic "window books" that offer students access to other worlds, times, and cultures, their lives can be changed in broadening their knowledge, perspectives, and experiences (5). Educators and researchers in education agree on this point, as can be seen in the Common Core State Standards currently set in place in 44 states to date. In Appendix B of the Standards (2014), each grade level in English Language Arts lists novels, nonfiction, poetry, and so on that almost all hold the title of the "classic." American school system changes everyday, but the presence of classics in the classroom remains as a way to provoke thought in students and teach carefully crafted themes that stand the test of time.

Thus, if "the Classics" remain integral parts of English education, every teacher must ask him or herself a few important questions: What gets students excited about a story? How can we make Literature relevant to older students? Based on education-focused scholarly research and ideas from teachers currently trying these methods themselves, I believe future educators like myself do not have to look very far to find that answer.

Resource 1: Technology

In fact, the very "problem" that distracts students can be redirected as an extremely effective solution. Educators often think of "technology" in the classroom as a hindrance to their instruction techniques; i.e., when a cell phone or iPad dings with a new message or a student uses a laptop for Facebook rather than research, it is no surprise that educators are cautious about either keeping technology out of the classroom or putting up safeguards to strictly regulate its

use. For example, just one Pew Research Center study found that 64 percent of teens have texted while in class (without permission), and there are many more studies like it that report increasing numbers with each passing year (Bouchard, 2011, p. 4). However, research has shown that the use of technology can be harnessed and used to enhance student learning. For example, "3 Tips on Using Tech in the Classroom," "Study: Emerging Technology Has Positive Impact in Classroom," "More High Schools Implement iPad Programs," and "5 Unique Uses of Twitter in the Classroom" are just a few *U.S. News and World Report* (2014) articles currently featured on their webpage under education–and there are plenty more just like those, demonstrating both a rise in use and effectiveness in utilizing forms of technology in the classroom. In addition, Lakeville District in Minnesota serves as an example for iPads being a success in the classroom. They report that 20 out of 31 classrooms had an increase in student learning, and 24 were generally more motivated (*Star Tribune,* 2013, p.1). Thus, using iPads, laptops, interactive whiteboards, blogs, vlogs, and a multitude of Internet study and lesson resources has become an expectation from both students and the state. In fact, the Common Core State Standards Initiative (founded in 2010) has published standards that explicitly call for students to work with technology in some degree. On the Common Core website (*corestandards.org*) and in lesson plans across America, one can easily find technology embedded into any and all aspects of learning:

> CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.5
> Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest.

For English Language Arts teachers, "digital" materials may seem out of place at first. Science and math classes may require sophisticated calculators and devices, but where does technology

come in within a classroom full of old fashioned books, articles, and papers? The simple answer

lies in the way the Standards have been created and categorized:

Students are held to standards in Reading (in the categories of Literature, Informational Text, and Foundational Skills), Writing, Speaking & Listening, Language, and various aspects of Range, Quality, & Complexity. In focusing on the entire range of what is termed "Language Arts," students and teachers have the opportunity to do more than the traditional reading and writing. In fact, The Common Core State

Reading: Literature

Reading: Informational Text

Reading: Foundational Skills

Writing

Speaking & Listening

Language

Standard 10: Range, Quality, & Complexity

Standards Initiative uses the tagline "Preparing America's Students for College & Career"

because these categories ask students to not only read the material, but to think critically about

what they are reading and present the information they learn in innovative ways. According to

Common Core, "The standards also lay out a vision of what it means to be a literate person who

is prepared for success in the 21st century" (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2014).

Thus, in the 21st century, technology has become an undeniable part of progress and success. In

an article from *U.S. News and World Report* (2011), "Students inhabit a 21st century world for

18 hours a day...[A]nd, all too often, educators put them in a 19th century classroom for six

hours of that day, and the students feel a tremendous disconnect. We have a responsibility to

teach them the skills to optimize these tools" ("Study: Emerging Technology Has Positive

Impact in Classroom"). Therefore, it has become imperative that the next generation of students

not only knows how to *use* technology, but learns to use it effectively– starting with integration in the classroom.

Resource 2: Media

One of the most prevalent outcomes of the advancement of technology, however, is the overwhelming presence of both the media surrounding popular culture and social media. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and other major forms of media have become hubs for just as much or more social interaction than real life human interaction. According to Stanford University and the Kaiser Family Foundation (2008), "Young people today live media-saturated lives, spending an average of nearly 6 ½ hours a day (6:21) with media. Across the seven days of the week, that amount is the equivalent of a full-time job, with a few extra hours thrown in for overtime (44½ hours a week)" (p. 6). In 2014, one can imagine how that estimation must be even higher as iPhones and Android phones and tablets have gained popularity with every app added to media stores. Especially when thinking of a traditional public classroom setting, websites and apps like Twitter may seem out of place at first. In fact, school networks often block social media websites so students are less likely to be distracted from doing schoolwork in class. However, using clips from YouTube and using websites like Twitter can be used in a positive way that advances learning. Steven Goodman, a teacher and school reform writer who specializes in media literacy in his book *Teaching Youth Media: A Critical Guide to Literacy, Video Production, and Social Change* (2003), explains that television, film, video, and more newly emerging forms of entertainment easily grab student attention through engaging all senses. He writes, "the stories are more likely to be retained by the child viewer than by the child reader because of the rich range of visual and aural information conveyed" (p. 35). Thus, utilizing technology and media sources ranging all the way from television shows to Twitter feeds in the classroom actually has the ability to grab students' attention and present core curriculum

concepts in a more easily retained audio/visual format. In fact, as education has evolved over time, the emphasis on differentiation *calls* for innovative ways to teach the material for a variety of student ability and learning styles. Goodman also explains:

> Furthermore, if schools also provided students with a broad range of media tools-- video, photography, film, print magazine, radio, webzine, or multimedia--with which to conduct their inquiries and present their work to a community audience, the students' repertoire of critical literacy skills would be that much more deepened and refined with each new project experience. (p. 62)

Therefore, teachers who take advantage of the technology involving media tools students are already using also increase their students' critical thinking skills when engaging with all sorts of texts. To be able to work with a concept, an idea, or theme presented in a variety of formats is to see with a new, critical perspective– which is essential in reading and analyzing a classic novel.

Resource 3: Satire

Technology and media are new and innovative ways of engaging with students, but another effective way grounded in the beginning of literature is satire. According to *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (2014), Satire originally comes from the Latin word "satura" and dates back to the ancient Greeks and Romans. Though these plays could be humorous, they have since expanded to fit multiple different categories, including Juvenalian, Horatian, and Menippean satires, all of which go one step further by adding a layer of criticism that requires critical thinking about even the funniest of representations (*britannica.com*). According to Oxford Dictionary (2014), satire can be generally defined as "the use of humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize people's stupidity or vices, particularly in the context of contemporary politics and other topical issues" (*oxforddictionaries.com*). Classically, teachers and students read Jonathan Swift's essay "A Modest Proposal" or Alexander Pope's

poem "The Rape of the Lock" as examples of satire. However, from a contemporary standpoint, students will recognize *The Onion* and *The Colbert Report* as two of the most prominent examples of satire mainly because they each report the news in a way that directly criticizes what is happening in the world through jokes, exaggeration, and being ridiculously absurd about otherwise serious topics. This kind of analysis of a storyline, whether real or fictional, can especially be applicable in the classroom when reading classic literature. Craig Stark, another researcher in education asserts, "Satire is a way to boost student interest in a subject about which many students are not deeply absorbed. The idea is that critical media analysis doesn't hurt as much if you are laughing at a familiar film, or television show, or ad, or song" (Stark, 2003, p. 306). Therefore, according to Stark, satire not only asks students to think critically about a text, but makes the process of doing so immensely more enjoyable. As stated in an article in which satire is used as a primary teaching tool, "One student after another in rapid succession was called upon to suggest a topic suitable for satire while the teacher and two students wrote the ideas on the board. Three times around the class and both blackboard and student brains were filled with ideas" (Hillocks, 1961, p. 339). Likewise, if students are challenged to think creatively, they respond with more thoughtful answers than simply gleaning from a text what they think they need for an upcoming test. Hillocks, even as early as 1961, also refutes that giving gifted and talented students (or any ability level) a greater quantity of work just to challenge them is ridiculous; instead, he asserts that asking students to ask more in-depth questions about the texts they are reading, specifically with satire, makes student learning more entertaining and challenging. Therefore, it seems that teachers have a responsibility in the modern age to reevaluate the methods used to challenge students, shifting from a large number of challenges to a more in-depth, critical one through satire. Making something that may be bland, such as classic literature, into something humorous and tests students on the depth of their

analysis and creative thinking to be critical about a piece makes the entire project an entertaining experience that students will remember for a lifetime.

Resource 4: Parody

Satire asks students tough questions about the texts they are reading, but in a broader sense, the use of humor alone along with adaptation can be used to engage students with the

> CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.6
> Analyze a case in which grasping a point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement).

essential parts of a text. Parody, for example, can be one of the most memorable ways of working with a text and one with which students easily relate. According to Oxford Dictionary (2014), parody involves "an imitation of the style of a particular writer, artist, or genre with deliberate exaggeration for comic effect" (*oxforddictionaries.com*). In popular culture, Weird Al Yankovic's music is iconic because of the humor it uses to reimagine songs like Michael Jackson's "Beat It" into "Eat It" or Chamillionaire's "Ridin Dirty" into "White and Nerdy." These song parodies imitate the music and style of the original songs, but present them in a new, creative way that catches the attention of the young and old alike. But to create a parody in the first place, one must be able to understand the meaning and style of the original. Expert in parody and media literacy Jonathan Gray explains, "Parody can provoke not only a heightened form of criticism and analysis of a targeted media text, but also an intricate, specialized knowledge of the text and its grammar and ideology, and a tangible sense of control, or at least adept awareness, of the text's inner workings" (p. 228). Therefore, parody, when done well, has the potential to represent a student's understanding of not only their favorite songs, but a work of literature. Common Core State Standards place special importance in the area of literature on student ability to understand multiple perspectives of a text:

However, teachers can go one step further than just preparing students to recognize and understand irony in a text. Grasping the concept of irony and expanding it to create a parody has the potential to become a learning and assessment tool in the classroom. One creative representation of parody in an academic setting is "'You're Turning into a Big Black Bug, Charlie Brown!' an animated [video] version of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* starring the Peanuts gang" (Beard et al., 1990, p. 50). Although this specific idea was created by a group of authors in the early 1990s just for entertainment purposes, the idea is also brilliant as a class project or assignment. *The Metamorphosis* is a tough read for many students, and is often deferred to college classes. However, when students are able to combine something they know well and like

(in this case, Peanuts) with something they are struggling with, they are forced to get to know the text intimately and work with it to create something much more grand and exciting. In another example from *The Book of Sequels: The Greatest Stories Ever Retold* (1990), a parody of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* includes an introduction to "a new Bennet sister, 'Dirty' Harriet, who won the hearts of Jane Austen fans by forestalling an insult from Elizabeth Bennet's old nemesis, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, with a cool 'I have no objection, your ladyship, to your proceeding, since, by so doing, you shall render my afternoon quite agreeable" (p. 19). Without a formal assessment, a teacher can tell how well the students understand the novel by how consistent the characters are portrayed, the meaning behind the type of humor presented, and how well the project illustrates the moral and societal issues Austen depicted, but from a
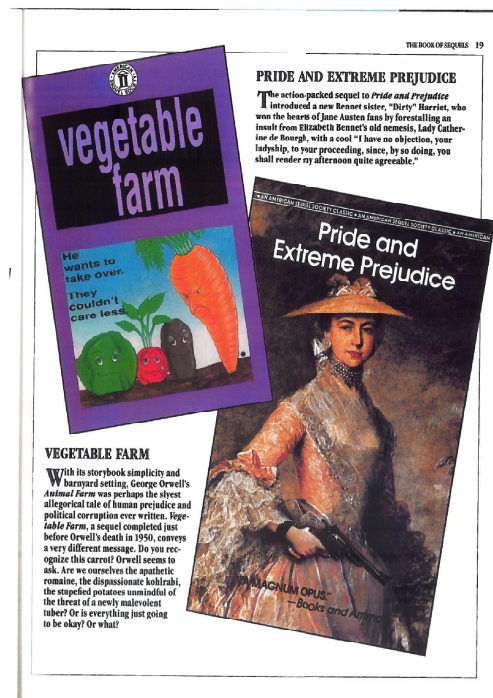
humorous modern or original view. The important thing to recognize when thinking of the power of parody, then, is that no example demonstrates its true power and potential better than those products created by students themselves. Reading and watching parodies from popular culture is entertaining; however, *creating* and *imagining* parodies becomes a learning experience.

The Projects

Emerging research in the areas of education and media promotes the use of technology, media, parody, and satire in the classroom as a way of engaging students like never before. Expert Renee Hobbs explains in her research (2007), "Instructional approaches that engage students with personally meaningful texts, authentic inquiry, and hands-on media production activities strengthen critical thinking and communication skills that directly support the development of reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills" (p. 32). In the 21st century English classroom, these reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills are significant in meeting Common Core State Standards, yet teaching those skills has become increasingly difficult in the modern era without using innovative strategies, such as "hands-on media production." While students often look for the "answers" to reading a book, teachers want to challenge their students to think critically about the arguments presented in the plot and theme of each text. In order to do so, however, the teacher must meet the students where they are, with what they know, and challenge them in creative ways–using these technology, parody, and satire skills.

Therefore, in order to integrate the resources of technology, media, parody, and satire, it only makes sense to demonstrate possible real-life, working student projects. Though these projects display only a few glimpses into the creative possibilities students have in learning about many concepts in their English classes, they illustrate a thorough understanding of not only basic plot points of a novel or play, but the underlying themes, character intricacies, and deeper

meanings residing in the texts. Specifically, three individual projects were planned and completed as representational models of what students *could* imagine doing in their classes based on any classic reading unit at the high school level. The concepts of each project could be completed all for one book, but for the purpose of describing a variety of options, I have chosen to work with a variety of texts, including Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, and Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. However, to make the texts more relevant when using parody and satire, popular culture is also woven into each project. Hobbs explains, "Visual, digital, and popular culture 'texts' are just as worthy subject for critical analysis as canonical works of classic and contemporary theory" (p. 32). Therefore, if these different types of texts are all valuable, why not weave them together to revitalize and reimagine the old with the new?

Project 1: *Romeo & Juliet & Vampires*

The first project takes on an entirely new perspective on the Shakespearean classic *Romeo and Juliet.* Students typically have trouble understanding "thee," "thou," and other unique vocabulary and phrasing techniques used specifically by Shakespeare and other English writers of the late sixteenth century. Especially in the shocking death scene where Romeo and Juliet finally kill themselves in error, not understanding what the text is saying and thereby missing some of the implications of what has happened can be easily lost. Therefore, to make this scene more relevant, exciting, and understandable, students can create a parody of the scene using one of the most popular obsessions of this time–the vampire genre. Though Romeo and Juliet's deaths creates a very tragic ending to the play, reimagining the couple as vampires makes their attempted suicides humorous because as vampires, they will never die. As funny as this

scene could be, how are students learning from such a project? Education research and reform

expert David Seitz (2011) writes:

> The sequence of assignments moves from irony at the surface level toward
> committed critical analysis. This sequence requires reciprocal processes of play
> (with form and content) and critical reflections on the rhetorical implications of
> that play...Still other students, of course, will not develop their analysis far
> beyond the play of surface irony. Yet for those students who do gain a more
> critical understanding of these rhetorical strategies, the process "works" because
> they think more inductively. Because the process of writing parody requires their
> own analysis of rhetorical strategies to develop the 'ironic critical distance' that
> Hutcheon claims is necessary for parody, the process may be more internally
> persuasive to students. (p. 373)

In essence, Seitz recognizes that creating parodies requires a thorough understanding of the plot

points of the text–-one must know that Romeo and Juliet kill themselves and understand the

reasoning behind their actions to create an alternative ending for their immortal lives. Even more,

giving students the opportunity to not only write the parody, but perform and record it, puts

education back into the students' hands while meeting Speaking & Listening standards for using

technology in the classroom:

> Put cameras into the hands of young people and you have empowered them to tell
> stories and to create their own personal narratives. It's simple. Using production-
> editing software (e.g., Final Cut Pro, iMovie; Windows Media Maker), students
> quickly learn how to edit and manipulate words, images, and sounds and begin to
> appreciate the process...[They] provide a plethora of opportunities for us meet
> standards, benchmarks, and objectives. (Baker, 2012, p. 106)

Therefore, creating an absurd representation of *Romeo and Juliet* is effective because it seamlessly integrates the technology of video, YouTube uploading, popular culture, and the classic understanding of canonical texts and their stories.

> ***The example model can be found here:*** https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CZAGsHFZ5rY

Project 2: *Death of an IT Guy*

The next project utilizes satire to make an outdated play more relevant and engaging. Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* follows the life of Willy Loman as an unstable traditional door to door salesman gives up in his pursuit of the "American dream" as his sons and wife pick up the pieces. Due to the nature of the original text, there is already a persuasive critique of what it means to be "successful" and finding meaning in the "American Dream." However, students can build on this discrepancy between societal expectations and the reality of Willy Loman's life by exaggerating the satire and making it relevant. This project idea essentially transforms Willy Loman's character into the modern day version of an IT salesman who only gets into the computer business because there are job openings and money– yet little happiness or self-fulfillment. To represent this idea and to further critique our own modern day expectations of "success," students can create a digital Glog poster online that illustrates Willy Loman as he might be today. Students then have the opportunity to be artistically creative as well as critical in their portrayal of the character and his relevance to us today. And as fun as doing this project may be, it is important to note that at this point, two of the project models embody one of the Common Core State Standards (2014) in two ways at once: "Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text. (Include at least one play by Shakespeare and one play by an American dramatist" (11-12.7). In both *Romeo and Juliet* and *Death of a*

Salesman, students interpret various original forms of the plays, then go the step further to create, interpret, and explain their own and its relevance to understanding the text as a whole.

Project 3: @YaBoyCapt_Ahab *on Twitter*

While social media may not be an appropriate place for teacher/student interaction on a personal level, it can be an amazing resource to utilize for academic material. For this project, students will create personal profiles for a character of their choice. Many students already have their own Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram profiles and are experts on navigating those sites to display certain ideas, pictures, and updates to friends and family. Therefore, this project utilizes those skills (or builds upon them) for a fun, yet academic purpose. In a higher education journal

The example model can be found here: http://ashleyton.edu.glogster.com/death-of-an-it-guy/

called *About Campus* (2013), researcher Paige Abe explains, "a study conducted by Rey Junco, Greg Heiberger, and Eric Loken supports student learning through use of twitter as a medium to facilitate book discussion, give students a low-stress way to ask questions, share class and campus event reminders, provide academic support, and help students connect with one another" (18). Furthermore, when choosing a specific character, students are essentially creating a parody account that must stick to accurate information about that character and ideas that character might actually share on Twitter. In his book, Seitz reflects (2011), "To design successful parody, the parodist must closely study the original text and foster a critical distance from it to be able to create those levels of 'ironic inversion.' These practices certainly foster critical reading of a text's rhetorical strategies" (p. 374). Thus, in project model of using Captain Ahab from *Moby Dick,* there had to be an understanding of how the author portrays Ahab as well as how Ahab's actions, motivations, and relevant information regarding the rest of the novel. Specifically, in the Twitter account @YaBoyCapt_Ahab, Ahab retweets other accounts like @TheWhaleFacts and

@SperryTopSider, saying things like "Retweet if there is a special whale in your life" and "Kinda angry @SperryTopSider never asked to sponsor my voyage on the Pequod. Totally would have stepped up my revenge game" because they directly relate to the whale in the novel, Moby Dick. However, the model account also tweets direct quotes from the novel and makes inferences about what Ahab might be thinking throughout the novel– which takes higher level thinking when considering not only what is directly stated, but what can be inferred from a close analysis of the text. Furthermore, tweeting has a full range of options where students can interact with other characters, retweet relevant information, and start hashtags for important ideas or motifs in the novel-- and what could be more fun that hashtagging a novel?

The example model can be found here: https://twitter.com/yaboycapt_ahab

Reflection and Conclusion

　　Through educational research and the experiences of educators in the field right now, it has been proven in many instances across the country that technology and the use of parody and satire are indeed effective in helping students learn. Even so, in creating the projects like those described in this outline, one might think that simply making videos and tweeting underscores the depth of what the classics are able to bring to the classroom. However, these learning activities are not meant to replace teacher instruction or depth of discussion that should be going on in the classroom. They are not sole resources used to teach the novels; instead, they are *tools* for gauging student comprehension and assessing their ability to apply their understanding to more complicated and creative criticisms of the text. The thought process in creating these projects was not to help students "have fun," but to help generate a connection, even a passion, for some of the texts they will come across through asking them to spend time analyzing and evaluating scenes, characters, themes, and so on. Gray (2005) explains this concept perfectly by saying that techniques like parody "do not patronize us or talk us down," but rather invite the

reader or viewer inside the world of the text without feeling like a typical "lesson" (p. 234). Suddenly, reading and literary analysis become an adventure in searching for meaning, just as students are finding meaning in their own young lives. Through technology, media, parody, satire, and most importantly, a teacher who is willing to be creative, students will engage with the classics in new and exciting ways.

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