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Studies in Drama

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Rap Music: Shakespeare Isn't Hard

Shakespeare in the classroom is something that some high school and college students find difficult to understand and comprehend. Many of these same students enjoy listening to popular music which often times includes rap and hip-hop music artists and songs. This paper aims to compare the levels of accessibility and complexity in the language of modern rap and hip-hop music and the levels of accessibility and complexity in the language of Shakespeare. Through examining a specific monologue from a Shakespeare play and a specific rap song from modern hip-hop music, the comparison of these two texts, their meanings, and their level of accessibility will show that the degree of difficulty in understanding and comprehending Shakespeare is no more difficult than comprehending and understanding a modern rap song.

The modern hip-hop song that will be examined is the first verse from *We The People* from the group A Tribe Called Quest. This song is taken from the group's final studio album entitled *We got it from Here...Thanks 4 Your service*. The album has been successful since it was digitally released on November 11, 2016 as it has seen time at the top of the Billboard charts. This particular song was performed by the group during a live broadcast of Saturday Night Live on November 12, 2016 and seems to be a relevant piece not just in the music world but in the political realm too. The lyrics of this song will be further reviewed later on in the paper.

The monologue that will be investigated is from the play *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and it will be from the character Puck in the character's final speech in the play. In a survey done by *American Theatre* magazine, Shakespeare as a playwright was the most produced playwright in the country among professional theatres, having been produced 91 times in the past year. Meanwhile, National Public Radio has compiled data taken from *Dramatics Magazine's* yearly survey that shows that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* since the 1990's has been either the top or 2nd ranked play produced among high schools and middle schools in the United States. With the widespread success of Shakespeare in productions and the commercial success that *A Tribe Called Quest* has seen on the Billboard charts with their final studio album, both pieces that will be examined share a common trait of commercial success, which will allow a widespread accessibility to both texts.

Before approaching the texts of the song and monologue, there is a need to discuss the use of rap. In his Introduction in the book *Say Word!: Voices from Hip Hop Theatre*, Daniel Banks says "Rap is an important part of Hip Hop culture as a form of counterhegemonic art, and there are many thoughtful, conscious artists using the mode of rap to communicate progressive social messages." (Banks, 3) The lyrics below will show those social messages. In looking at the text of the lyrics, it's important to understand that most audiences of hip-hop music don't typically take the time to read the lyrics to gain a further understanding. In using the lyrical text as a piece of literature, this will allow a more thorough examination of the rap song and the ways in which it can be compared to a body of text from Shakespeare. In looking at the language of the hip-hop song, it is best to simply examine it as poetry. In doing this, it allows the reader an

easier way to approach and comprehend the material. Upon looking further at the lyrics of the hip-hop song it will be necessary to analyze the lyrical content along with the rhyme scheme.

Here are the lyrics for the first verse of the song in discussion. Underneath each line of lyric will be an explanation of the lyrical meaning. Most of these meanings have been taken from the website (<http://www.genius.com>), while some were simply my own thoughts.

We don't believe you 'cause we the people

(“We the people” being taken from the Constitution and this line showing the distrust of government.)

Are still here in the rear, ayo, we don't need you

(A reference to the fact that during the Civil rights movements, African Americans had to sit in the back of the bus making the lessar of human beings. And the lyric suggesting that even today with little respect given to African Americans, and still not needing the government to help them.)

You in the killing-off-good-young-nigga mood

(This lyric brings up individuals like Trayvon Martin, Freddie Gray, and Michael Brown being shot and killed by white men, often police officers) - Provide Footnotes for 3 names

When we get hungry we eat the same fucking food

The ramen noodle

(When people get hungry they eat, and yet for the rapper in the song, the food he can afford is The Ramen Noodle. Not everyone will eat that same food because the rich have money to eat what they want.)

Your simple voodoo is so maniacal, we're liable to pull a juju

(A reference to voodoo economics or white/good magic” while the juju is black “bad” magic.)

The irony is that this bad bitch in my lap

She don't love me, she make money, she don't study that

She gon' give it to me, ain't gon' tell me run it back

She gon' take the brain to wetter plains, she spit on that

(This set of lines could possibly speak to a few things but if taken at face value, it could easily be about a stripper, but seeing that this rapper doesn't typically talk about strippers, the lines could then speak to the campaign of Hillary Clinton and the distrust of the African American Community.)

The doors have signs with, don't try to rhyme with

VH1 has a show that you can waste your time with

Guilty pleasures take the edge off reality

And for a salary I'd probably do that shit sporadically

(These next lines make reference to reality TV culture, and that by watching said programming you can avoid reality. The rapper is more than likely referencing Love & Hip-Hop, and it isn't something he would usually do for money, but he may sporadically entertain the idea of doing it.)

The OG Gucci boots are smitten with iguanas

(These lines referencing leather boots being made with iguana skin) - footnotes

The IRS piranha see a nigga gettin' commas

(The rapper calls out the IRS as a predatory fish that preys on emcee's in the hip-hop community that have been successful in the past.)

Niggas in the hood living in a fishbowl

(Those individuals in the "hood" are unable to make it "out" since they're in a limited environment. Those on the outside, watch the "fishbowl" for entertainment.)

Gentrify here, now it's not a shit hole

(Gentrification is the process of pushing out the lower class and pushing in more affluent people.)

Trendsetter, I know, my shit's cold

(Having a cool style is what causes the gentrification. They want this cool neighborhood to have affluent white people. But the Trends are being set in the “hood”)

Ain't settling because I ain't so bold but ay

(In this line, the artist mentions that if he were more responsible, he might be more okay with that gentrification, and “settling.”)

These lyrics are not Shakespeare, but much like Shakespeare their lyrical content is filled with a depth beyond the words. In some cases the words didn't actually even mean what they said but yet alluded to something else all together. Their prosodic elements allow for the listener to hear not just lyrics but also the rhymes that exist throughout the verse.

Next a look at the final text from A Midsummer Night's Dream by William Shakespeare, beneath each line of Shakespeare's text will be the line of text from the “No Fear Shakespeare” version. As can be seen below, the “translated” version almost serves to complicate the story further and just make a clear and concise statement, muddy and confusing.

PUCK

If we shadows have offended, / Think but this, and all is mended,

(If we actors have offended you- Just think of it this way and everything will be all right)

That you have but slumber'd here / While these visions did appear.

(You were asleep when you saw these visions,)

And this weak and idle theme, / No more yielding but a dream,

(and this silly and pathetic story was no more real than a dream)
Gentles, do not reprehend: / if you pardon, we will mend:
(Ladies and gentlemen, don't get upset with me. If you forgive us, we'll
make everything all right.)
And, as I am an honest Puck, / If we have unearned luck
(I am an honest Puck, and I swear if we are lucky enough)
Now to 'scape the serpent's tongue, / We will make amends ere long;
(not to get hissed at, we'll make it up to you soon)
Else the Puck a liar call; / So, good night unto you all.
(If not, then I'm a liar. So goodnight to everyone.)
Give me your hands, if we be friends, / And Robin shall restore amends.
(Give me some applause, if we're friends, and Robin will make everything
up to you.)

These words from the character of Puck are his way of telling the audience that if they did not like what they had just witnessed, then his solution for them was simple: Just pretend it was a dream. Shakespeare wrote these particular rhyming couplets and it is in fact in English. Students may argue that it is not material that is easily accessible and that they “don't get it.”

As teachers prepare students to learn Shakespeare and poetry every year, the way in which the students take in Shakespeare and the poetry should be examined. Students often find themselves bored with the “hard” text of Shakespeare and don't always look beyond literal translations of poetry. In Ian Leslie's book *Curious The Desire to Know and Why Your Future Depends on It* he says that “As we grow older, we tend to become less active explorers of our

mental environment, relying on what we've learned so far to see us through the rest of the journey." This sort of thinking is unfortunately much of what our students are bringing into the classroom of today. There is a trepidation to learning and specifically a fear of taking on Shakespeare and Poetry. "Curiosity starts with the itch to explore." (Leslie, xx) If that itch is gone before ever beginning then there is no chance at reaching students with Shakespeare, or anything for that matter. It is with the injection of Hip-Hop music into the classroom that we can start the itch in the student curiosity. The student will find themselves longing to further explore the way that modern Hip-Hop music can be so seamlessly traced to Shakespeare and how those two literary formats can be absorbed in quite an easy manner.

Revisiting the translations briefly to look at the meaning behind the words, it is quite plain to see that the hip-hop song verse took more time and in-depth thought to find the meaning behind the words. The complexities that shine through in the lyrical meanings are clear, if not for the annotations, then the meanings may be unclear to readers. The Shakespeare text that was used was more straightforward and was not at all a difficult translation. Much of the translated text is similar to its original counterpart and it did not require footnotes for additional definitions. Again, it is not uncommon for students to use excuses in their encounters with The Bard to "buy some time" in providing their thoughts to a teacher. This is a tactic that is used by the student to show that they had some difficulty in dealing with the text but also to avoid being wrong.

In looking at additional methods used to make Shakespeare more accessible, there are certainly not a lack of resources available. There are movies, tv shows, plays, musicals, songs, books, magazines, and even Legos and action figures. In looking specifically at Shakespeare and

Hip-Hop, there is a decent amount of resources available there too. Although some of those resources look at “rapping Shakespeare” or turning Shakespeare’s Dialogues into Hip-Hop songs, that should not be confused with what this paper is aiming to do. This is not to say that there is no merit in those approaches to making The Bard more accessible to audiences but simply to say that is not the goal in this look at Shakespeare and Hip-Hop music. In the book *Shakespeare and Youth Culture*, Kevin J. Wetmore Jr. says that “Hip-Hop and Rap have also been posited as means to educate youth to understand Shakespeare in terms of that which they already know.” (Wetmore Jr. 155)

By dually examining the lyrics to a rap song and the text of a Shakespeare monologue, it shows students that they can critically examine a piece of text from contemporary times and a text from Renaissance England and then discuss how both texts are just as relevant.

“Shakespeare’s world and language are “foreign” to contemporary America, in every sense of the word.” (Wetmore Jr. 164) “As with rock and roll, hip-hop is popular music, and both serve Shakespeare in the same way. Both make Shakespeare accessible.” This becomes an important piece in the classroom as students are able to successfully tackle a text of lyrics in a rap song, they are able to see their ability can then further go beyond and successfully tackle Shakespeare. One half of the Chicago based Q Brothers Gregory Qaiyum puts it this way “Shakespeare was a rapper. He was a master storyteller who used poetry and musical language to tell his stories. It is no different with rappers today.” (Qaiyum)

In looking at both pieces of text, there are similarities and differences in the pieces. The similarities come in the simplest of forms, with both having basic poetic structures, but also using figurative language to paint pictures with their words for their audiences. Their differences

come in their rhyme schemes. Puck's speech is entirely couplets that have pure rhymes. Whereas *We The People*, has some slant rhymes, and while yes, it has some couplets to, it isn't structured to where it has to be married to that style. So it breaks from that style now and then. Both pieces have their own sing-song nature to them, and Puck's words in this last moment could easily make the jump to hip-hop song, but again that is not the focus here.

While looking at a Hip-Hop song as a literary text and using a piece of text from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It is clear to see the levels of accessibility between the two pieces. One piece came as relatively straight-forward and with a sense of ease to wrap your head around. While the other piece came with a higher degree of difficulty in translating and understanding. The more difficult piece was filled with political references, and found a way to make the language less accessible for its listener. The easier piece had a sing-song rhyme structure to it that would itself fit into the hip-hop music world with a few simple adjustments. Even for an avid fan or frequent listener of hip-hop music, it should come as no surprise that in the end the literary text from the Epilogue from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was easier to translate than the modern day rap song.

For the college student of today, or the modern high schooler that says they have trouble with Shakespeare because "it's too hard," well if you like rap music and you understand those hip-hop lyrics, then you're pages beyond Shakespeare. Take a suggestion from Hip-Hop Icon, Ice Cube as he says in his song *Check Yo Self*. "So chickity-check yo self before you wreck yo self Come on and check yo self before you wrickity-wreck yo self." That's right even Ice Cube knows that you're not fooling anyone. Comprehending Shakespeare may be hard, but comprehending Rap music, is harder.

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However, the star did break into song during one of the night's sketches. A spoof of the reality show *The Bachelor*, it saw Adele enter the competition as a female contestant looking for a date. "I'm here because I've had a lot of heartbreak in my life - first at 19 and then, sort of famously, at 21 and then, even more famously, at 25," she said, referencing the titles of her first three albums. Adele on *The Bachelor* is the crossover we didn't know we needed #SNL pic.twitter.com/ohN1hnWbsk. "Chicks in the Office" (@ChicksInTheOff) October 25, 2020. The day after Adele's performance, her debut album *19* took the top spot on the iTunes chart for the first time, while *Chasing Pavements* climbed the Billboard chart from 46 to 11, giving the star her first US hit. image copyrightNBC. Prior to the creation of the Hot 100, Billboard published four singles charts: "Best Sellers in Stores", "Most Played by Jockeys", "Most Played in Jukeboxes" and "The Top 100". These charts, which ranged from 20 to 100 slots, were phased out at different times between 1957 and 1958. Though technically not part of the Hot 100 chart history, select data from these charts are included for computational purposes, and to avoid unenlightening or misleading characterizations. All items listed below are from the Hot 100 era, unless otherwise noted (pre-Hot 100 charts). Contents. 1 All-Time Hot 100 ach Paul, however, has done the song live a few times. It's also worth noting that during the original recording session, a take of the song was transmitted live as part of an international television special called *Our World*, and there was something of an audience in the studio, but I wouldn't really call it a live performance. So, depending on how you count, you could say that the Beatles have 8 songs which fit this category (never performed live by the Beatles as a group), 1 (never performed live by the group nor its original lead singer), or none (as all the songs have been performed by at least one member). Top Charts. Hot 100 Songs. Billboard 200. View All. Top Videos. The icon will get to add another gem to his bedazzled crown this weekend when he hosts *Saturday Night Live* for the very first time. Taking to the Studio 8H stage on Saturday night alongside musical guest Justin Bieber, this won't be RuPaul's first time on the show; back in 1993, Ru briefly appeared in a sketch when Charles Barkley served as host. With Mama Ru taking center stage on Saturday, we decided to put together our wish list of what we want to see on RuPaul's first time hosting SNL. Artist Mentioned. RuPaul. Doing the live portion of the show in drag might be pretty difficult, but if anyone can make it work, it's Ru. Share the spotlight with some *Drag Race* alums. The song was at the top of the charts for three weeks. Match the sentence halves (6) to (a-f). I like heavy 2 She's really I can read There is a great theme The band's lead 6 The song got to the top a b c d e f music because I studied violin when I was a child. song at the start of the film. singer left. They're looking for a new one. metal, especially groups like Metallica. of the charts at Christmas. into reggae. She's a big fan of Bob Marley. Complete the dialogue with the words from the box. B: () I've made/i was made twenty-two CDs and (2) I've perform/i've performed for the President many times. A: Fantastic. B: And () I've won/i've won eighteen awards.